



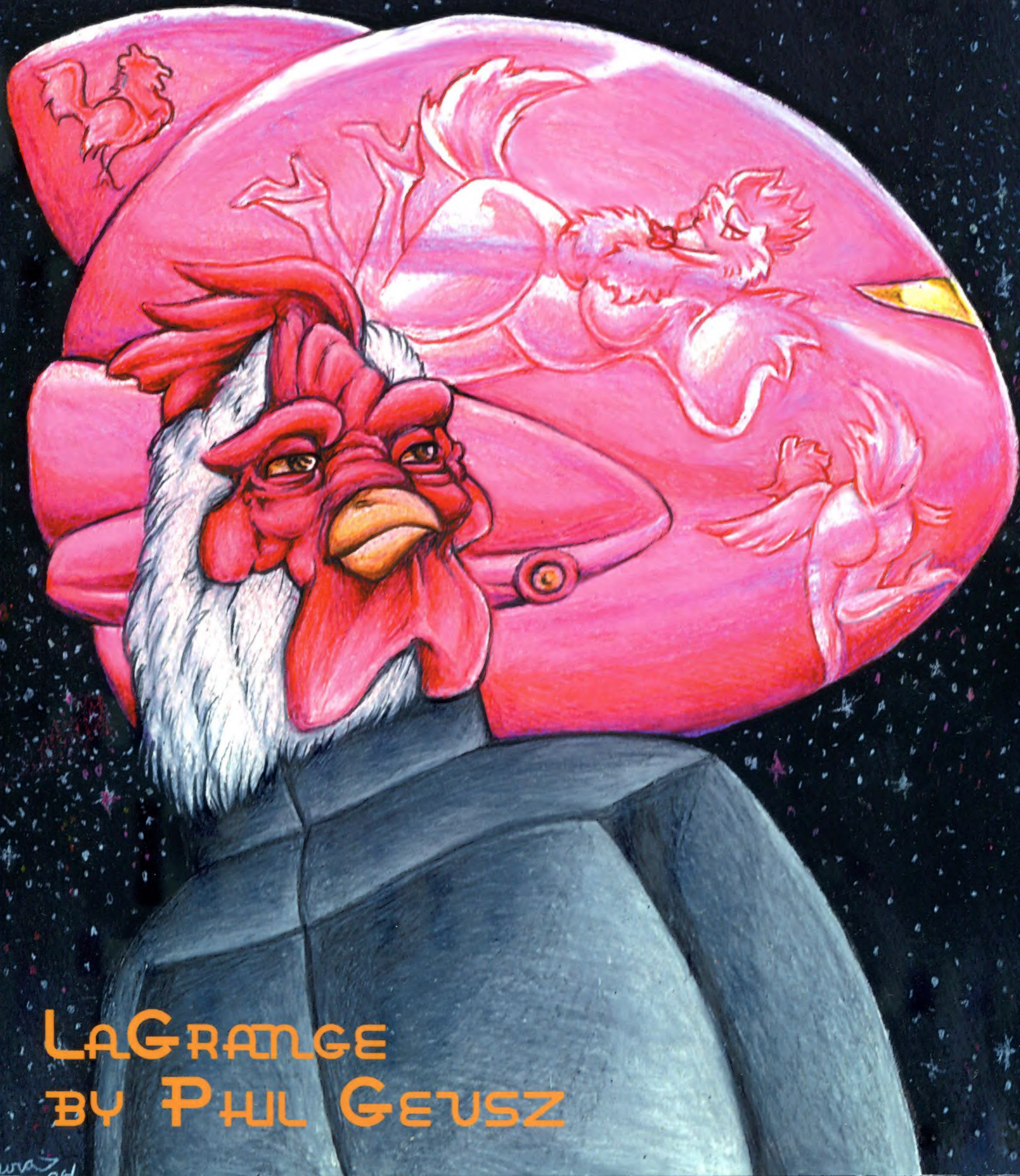
ANTHROLATIONS



The Magazine of Anthropomorphic Dramatic Fiction

ISSUE NO 8

11~2006



LAGRANGE
BY PAUL GEUSZ

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Lagrange

by Phil Geusz, illustrations by Aura Moser



5

Season's Meaning

by M.C.A. Hogarth



35

Nobody Ever Cared for Gregory Wraithhome

by Joseph Vandehey, illustrations by Cara Mitten



39

A Gathering of Tribes

by Robert Rubin, illustrations by Ayame Emaya



47

First Light

by Tim Susman, illustrations by John Nunnemacher



57



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Anthrolations welcomes submissions of fiction which feature anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters, and explore their interaction with the characters and situations around them. The optimum story will be 3,000 to 5,000 words in length, but longer or shorter works will be considered contingent on available space. Preference is given to first-run fiction, but reprints will be considered if all applicable rights have reverted to the author.

We also welcome artists interested in preparing illustrations for accepted stories.

For more information about our guidelines and submission rates, or to purchase copies of our products, please refer to the Sofawolf Press web site.

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Welcome to the eighth issue of Anthrolations. If you have been following us for a while you will be quite aware that it has been three years since we released Issue #7. What the heck happened? Ultimately the delay is a result of a lot of factors, but most relate back to the inescapable reality that time and money are both finite resources.

The publishing business runs on two basic models. You are either selling your content, or you are using your content as a lure to expose people to what you are really selling: advertising. The majority of books are published under the first model, and the majority of magazines are published under the second.

Sofawolf Press falls firmly into the first camp. Our job is to take material we think our readers want to see, polish it, present it in an appealing format, and sell it at what we feel is a fair price. The authors or artists get a cut, we get the rest, and (if I am doing my job properly) hopefully see enough profit from a title to cover our production costs quickly so that money can be re-assigned to new projects.

On a purely financial front, the periodical short-story collection (Anthrolations) is a tough one to balance. If a given issue has six stories with associated illustrations, that already leaves us paying money out to twelve different people. Great art and great stories aren't cheap (and rightly so), and we very frequently find that more than half of the production cost of a given issue are spent in giving the authors and artists their due. On the consumer side there is a limit to how much we can charge for a 60 page book, no matter how great the content and printing quality. The end result is that Anthrolations is one of the most costly products we produce, and is also one of the slowest to see a positive return.

Beyond the financial constraints, however, there is a serious time factor. The amount of time that a project requires to move from concept to final product depends on a lot of factors, editing being one of the more time-intensive. While naturally a novel takes longer to edit than a short story (or even six short stories), project management and administration are much less intensive on a project with one or two contributors (like a novel) than on a project with twelve. On top of this, with a product like Anthrolations, you don't only have the issue in production to worry about, you also have all the new submissions coming into the slushpile that need to be tracked, read, and responded to.

What it all boils down to is this... A short story collection is, by necessity, a labor of love. You need to be willing and able to put the time and the money into something which you know isn't going to give either back anytime soon, just because you love doing it. This was why we started Anthrolations in the first place, and really that hasn't changed; but what *has* changed is that as the business has grown, the time I have available to work on it has vanished (and then some).

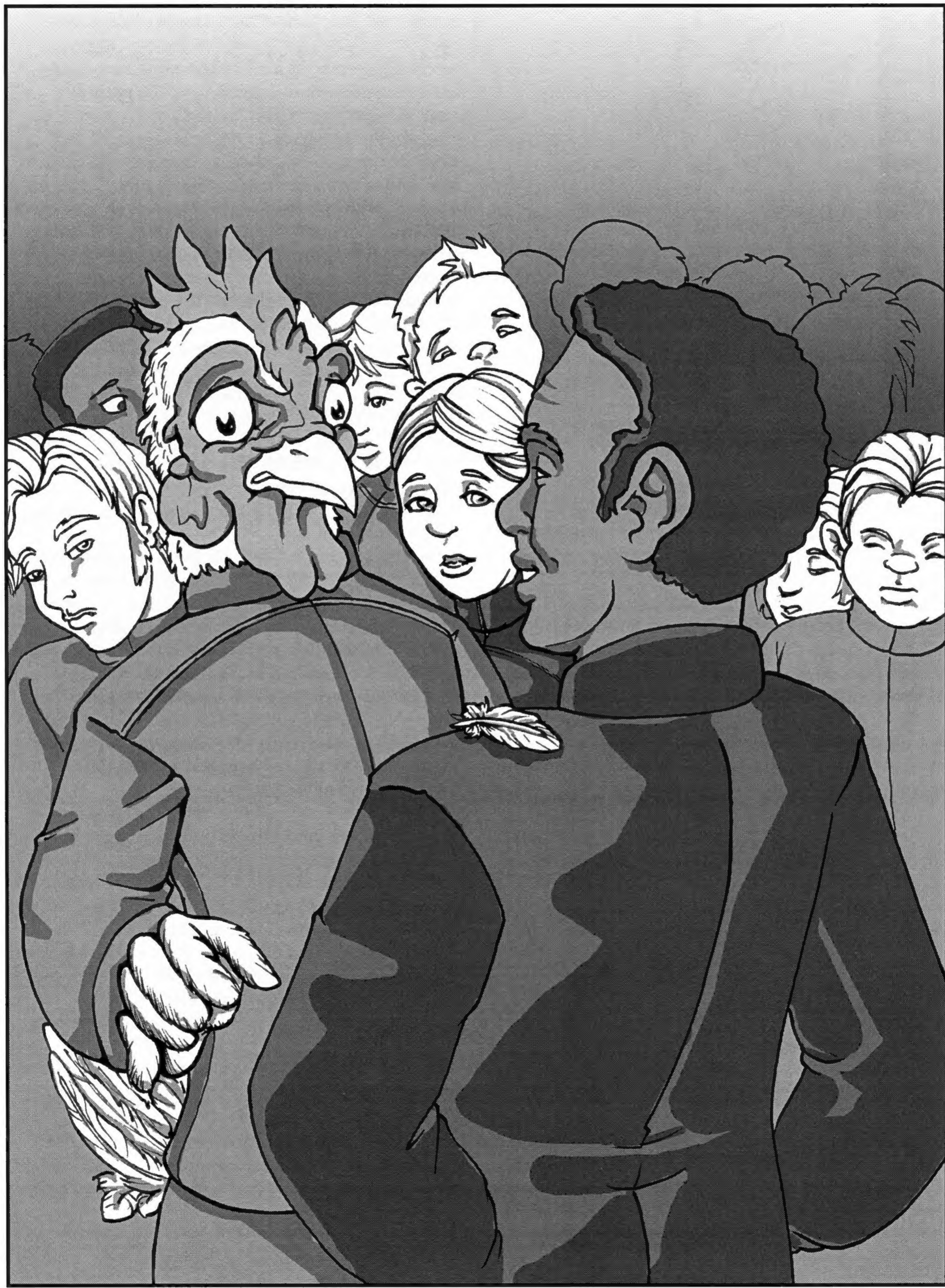
So then, is this the end? To that I can give a firm "I'm not sure." We have been searching for a new editor to lead the project for some time. We've had a couple false starts, but hope remains and getting this issue out of the stable is the first step forward. Time will tell if we can keep moving or not, but the stories in this issue were too good to let go to waste.

So, I encourage you sit back and enjoy the stories herein. They may be arriving two years later than we planned on, but they are just as enjoyable as the day they were made.

Phil Geusz brings us a story that is all about sex and yet still fits the Anthrolations theme perfectly. M.C.A. Hogarth brings us a short story well suited to the Holiday Season. Joseph Vandehey reminds us that a system that puts too much faith in first appearances can result in missed opportunities. Robert Rubin brings us a story of loss, deftly woven with cultural heritage and the power (and sometimes flexibility) of tradition. Finally, Tim Susman rounds out the issue with a tale of awakening—on many levels.

Here is to eight great issues, and to the hope that somehow we can keep bringing you great short stories... with much less waiting.





Lagrange

by Phil Geusz

illustrated by Aura Moser

- I -

"We live in an age of true space exploitation," Commodore Tottson said, winding up his formal speech. "An age where ordinary people can and do live out their entire lives in habitats such as this magnificent Lagrange station without ever stopping to think about the fact that they are immersed in the most hostile environment ever colonized by Mankind." The distinguished explorer smiled, displaying a perfect set of teeth that contrasted nicely with his midnight-black coveralls and coffee-colored features. The Commodore was a very handsome man, with gray-ing hair. His uniform looked as if it had just come from the tailor shop, and his shoes were so perfectly polished that they could have been used as shaving mirrors. "It is said that even the most impressive of technological miracles becomes commonplace over time," he continued, "and perhaps the truest measure of our triumph is the very normalcy of Lagrange's lifestyle. Merchants can spend their days thinking about buying and selling, not about where their next breath of air is going to come from. We attend our temples and churches and mosques on holy days, free to contemplate sacred texts instead of worrying about orbital decay. Children may go about the terribly serious business of growing up without fear of sudden power failures. Most of our citizenry has never put on a vacuum suit in their lives, and probably will never have a need to. Indeed, Lagrange's accidental mortality rate is far lower than that of Oslo, Nairobi, or Chicago.

"Yet despite our seeming triumph, very real dangers remain. There is only hard vacuum to be found beyond our hulls, and our very existences depend upon highly sophisticated and complex life support mechanisms. As certified Command Navigators, the very highest responsibility of each and every one of you will be to ensure the safety of those in your care. Because things have become so easy, *you* will be the

seasoned space hand; there will likely be no one else around able to help you. *You* must be prepared to improvise and to find creative ways to keep vital gear running. *You* must be skilled in EVA work, and *you* must know how to lead. There are very few of us left, we true spacemen, and our duties grow in importance every day." He smiled again; clearly this was the end of Tottson's routine speech. There were fourteen of us in the class, and all of us applauded heartily.

"Thank you!" Commander Mayberry said from the side of the room as she too applauded our guest speaker. "Thank you, sir, for a most welcome visit!"

"It's quite all right," Tottson said modestly. "I'm certain that these young men and women will someday soon be paying courtesy calls on me in my cockpit. And I them, of course." He paused and smiled again. "In fact, I understand that I have a working Brother already in the room, fully rated for intra-orbital pod work. Is that correct?"

Suddenly the room went dead silent, and I blushed under my feathers.

"Yes," Mrs. Mayberry replied after a hesitation that was only a fraction of second too long. "Yes, Marvin Mackleschmidt is a working pod pilot."

"Indeed!" the Commodore replied heartily, looking out over the classroom. "That's a terrific responsibility for one so young, and the qualifications are not all that much less than for a Command Navigator."

"Yes," my instructor replied. Gamely, she tried to change the subject. "Tell me, Commodore. On your last trip out to the Kuiper belt you found some most interesting--"

Tottson, however, was having none of it. Imperiously, he raised his hand and cut off Mayberry. "Who is this pod pilot?" he asked. "I'd like to pay a courtesy call, so to speak."

Suddenly I had a headache. Technically, as a Pod pilot I was indeed entitled to recognition as a brother Navigator, albeit barely. However, I'd much rather have crawled under a rock.

There was a second long silence. Then, finally I raised my hand.

"Ah!" the Commodore replied, his smile barely flickering as I stood and smoothed out my plumage. His self-control was most impressive; it wasn't every day that you found yourself confronted by a six-foot-tall chicken man. Tottson was politeness personified; if I chose to present myself to the world as a chicken, his manner clearly stated, it was no business whatsoever of his. "So you're the over-achiever!" He stepped across the room and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, ah...Brother. What ship?"

I gulped. The Commodore had been my hero since long before my voice had changed. I'd read every single one of his logs, and watched every docu-drama ever made about his adventures. There was no way out, not after he'd gone so far out of his way to be nice to me. I had to answer no matter how badly I wanted to deny the terrible truth. "*Aphrodite*, sir" I replied.

Tottson's face froze, and I looked down at the ground. "PT-69!" a classmate offered helpfully.

"The Pussy Pod!" another chimed in. There was a muffled snicker.

There was another long, awkward silence. It stretched out until Tottson realized that he was standing stock-still, gripping my unmoving hand. "Well!" he answered, releasing me. "Well..."

"Marvin has a perfect safety record after three months," my teacher interjected, attempting to defend my honor. Mrs. Mayberry had been my Pod certification instructor as well. I liked her a lot; she was allowing me to take her very expensive courses on credit. "He's doing well."

"It's a tremendous honor to meet you, sir," I mumbled, still looking down at the floor.

The Commodore nodded curtly, then returned to the front of the room. "Three months of perfect safety," he began again, though clearly his heart was no longer in it. "Three months without a single hard docking, without a downcheck of any kind. Now, three months isn't exactly a world's record; I've met a very few remarkable men with thirty years and more of such exemplary service. But three months is a solid beginning that each and every one of you should take note of..."

No one was paying attention, however. Instead, everyone was staring at the single white feather that had somehow found its way from my head onto the left shoulder of the Commodore's otherwise immaculate space-black uniform.

- II -

Twenty minutes later, I was boarding a taxi. *Aphrodite* was located clear at opposite end of Lagrange from where my classes were held. There was no way that I could walk such a distance, even

though I was trying to keep expenses under control. My pod made its run at twelve-hour intervals, and right at the moment there was no relief pilot available. I had a schedule to keep.

"One credit, please" the taxi's mechanical voice intoned as I climbed in. I tossed a coin in the hopper. "Thank you, Sir or Ma'am" the voice replied. The simple machine was baffled by my plumage, I knew. It happened every time. "Destination?"

"Sixty-Series dock bay," I enunciated carefully. *Aphrodite* was docked at lock number sixty-nine, of course. My employer had paid extra to get that specific number.

"Yes, sir!" the cab answered me, sounding more confident now that it had established my gender from the sound of my voice. For a brief moment I was pressed against the seat as we accelerated, and then I was on my way. "There are many fun places to go and entertaining things to do at Lagrange Station," the cab said. "Especially for adults."

"Do tell," I replied wearily. The only way to shut off the cab's ad track was to insert another credit, which I had no intention whatsoever of doing.

"Truly!" the cab replied, interpreting my remark as genuine interest. "In fact, there are several attractions to be found in the immediate vicinity of the Sixty-Series Docks. The most famous of these is these is the Henhouse Gentlemen's Club."

I closed my eyes and sighed. This was at least the thousandth time I'd heard this spiel.

"For those who are of legal age," the taxi continued after waiting in vain for my reply, "the Henhouse offers a truly exhilarating and congenial entertainment experience." There was a short pause. "They have a lot of nice girls."

There were no windows in the taxi, as the tracks often passed through privately owned areas where prying eyes were unwelcome. So I sat in my seat looking straight ahead, offering the cab no encouragement at all. The ads were less obnoxious that way.

"The Henhouse was conceived by Beauregard Montclair," the cab explained. "It's based on a similar establishment that was once located just outside La Grange, Texas back home on Earth. It became the most famous establishment of its kind in its day, a place where range-weary cowboys could come for a little rest and relaxation from time to time. There was once even a major Broadway play made about it. Mr. Montclair and his staff are determined that today's spacefaring cowboys should be able to find similar opportunities for rest and recreation located conveniently near Lagrange station."

I rolled my eyes. The Henhouse was a bordello, pure and simple. We had a bar, yes, but the girls were our bread and butter. Prostitution was illegal in Lagrange Station, but the Lagrange Board of Aldermen was only empowered to regulate a sphere

of space a hundred clicks in radius. The Henhouse orbited precisely one hundred and one kilometers out at all times. Part of my job was making damned certain that we never, ever drifted any closer. As things stood, the Aldermen could only stare at us spinning outside their portholes and fume impotently as their more adventurous sprits spent every spare credit just beyond their legal grasp. Beauregard was becoming very rich, very quickly. And the girls themselves weren't doing too badly, either.

"The cover charge is only a hundred credits," the cab continued. "This amount covers your transfer fare both ways aboard the newly-refurbished pod *Aphrodite*, and two complimentary drinks. More exotic pleasures are available at reasonable charges."

Much more exotic pleasures, I thought to myself. Much, much more exotic.

The cab began to slow. "I hope that you'll take the time to sample the truest pleasures of life, sir," it admonished me as we came to a smooth stop. "Dock Sixty-Nine. Be sure and tell them that the Lagrange Cab Company sent you and get a third drink free. We wouldn't steer you wrong."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I thought as I piled out, tossing my school computer over my shoulder. Be sure that your company gets its percentage of the take, you mean. Beauregard preferred to keep his patrons well lubricated; they would get that third drink for free regardless. Drunken johns were far more generous with their wallets than were sober ones.

As always, the Sixty-Series docks were among the busiest in Lagrange. Reserved for orbit-to-orbit pods only, they handled perhaps a third of Lagrange's total traffic. Dock Sixty-Nine was located all the way out at the far end of things. It was usually a far longer walk to *Aphrodite* than mere distance would seem to dictate.

"Hello, Marvin!" one of my fellow pilots called out as I passed Dock Sixty-Two, moving just as quickly as I could with my head held low. It was Jacob Fox, an acquaintance of long standing. "Been out scratching up some new business?" He laughed, and so did most of the others standing around with him. Sixty-Two was home to *Excalibur*, which shuttled at high boost between Lagrange and Armstrong Station, our newer and smaller twin located over at L-Four. *Excalibur* catered strictly to the carriage trade, ferrying men and women to whom time was far more valuable than money. Conning *Excalibur* was a very cushy job, one virtually guaranteed to move Jacob quickly up the incredibly competitive piloting ladder. He was

piling up kilometers and making important contacts, while I was running the whorehouse tram, logging a miserable hundred clicks on each circuit.

And his boss hadn't made him get himself made over into a chicken as a condition of employment, either!

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"Hi, Jacob!" I called back, trying not to admire *Excalibur's* sleek lines through the ports. "I'm afraid that we've already got all the business that we can handle."

"I'm not surprised," Jacob replied. "The Fleet's in, after all." Everyone laughed again.

I felt myself blushing under the feathers. The mining Fleet was in; that was how Commodore Tottson happened to be available to come speak to my class. Even worse, it was also payday for the construction riggers who were working massive overtime to expand our South Pole extracting facilities. The Henhouse would be full to overflowing tonight.

"The working girls get no rest when the Fleet's in," Jacob repeated nastily. "Maybe you'll have to help them out? What with all those feathers, a man could get confused. One hole's as good as another if you're drunk enough."

I stopped in my tracks and clenched my fists angrily, then began walking again as the laughter died away behind me. I was still a very new and green Pod pilot, and I knew it. Having a fistfight on my record was no way to earn a prestigious, dignified deep-space run someday, not when there were plenty of other qualified pilots out there without criminal records who would line up three-deep to take the job. In fact, I was rather beginning to suspect that I held the only piloting job in the known universe that certified pilots would *not* line up three deep for. No wonder Beauregard had hired me despite my inexperience. No one else had been desperate enough to apply.

A few johns were already sitting around drinking in *Aphrodite's* waiting area when I arrived. This was fairly normal; most of our clientele spent weeks saving up every penny for a trip out to the *Henhouse*, only to blow every last credit they owned and begin the cycle again. Most of the men were wearing deep-space coveralls; they were from the Fleet. A few were dressed in civilian attire, however, ranging from inexpensive casual shorts to full formal tights and doublets. Three of the private rooms were already spoken for, I could see. The private rooms were a royal pain in the butt for my crew and I; they were provided

(at a price) for those who wished to remain anonymous. Arnold was working the bar when I walked up. "Hello, Marvin!" he greeted me as I stepped up to the rail. "How's tricks?"

"Don't ask," I replied as my fellow Henhouse Staffer poured me a non-alcoholic cola to drink. If Beauregard had been around I'd have had to pay like everyone else, but at the moment he was Earthside trying to sweet-talk his investors into backing an expansion. "Thank you," I said as he pressed it into my hand.

"Don't mention it," my coworker replied with a very friendly smile. Arnold had originally been recruited as Talent, not Staff. In the beginning the Henhouse had catered to the gay crowd as well as the straight, and Arnold had been remade into a Nordic-looking muscleman as part of the effort. The experiment had simply not worked out, however, and the Henhouse had gone hetero-male only. That left Arnold with a huge morphing bill and no easy way to pay it off. So Beauregard had kept him on as Staff, even though he was probably paying far too much for him. My boss might be a cheapskate in some ways, I knew. But in other ways he was genuinely a man of honor as well. I would have really liked Arnold if he hadn't so obviously had the hots for me. It was the feathers, he'd explained once. The feathers made me irresistible.

So I didn't linger at the bar, instead carrying my drink with me as I began my preflight inspection. *Aphrodite* floated in solitary splendor outside the

Dock Sixty-Nine windows, her violently pink paint glowing warmly in the sunlight. I took a moment to visually inspect her hull, which encompassed the first items on my checklist. There was no visual damage, check. No extra mooring lines affixed, check. No workers present, check. Lurid big-breasted cartoon-chicken murals spread out for all the world to see, check...

I sighed as I entered the elevator and lowered myself down into *Aphrodite* herself. The Pussy Pod, everyone else called her, even her passengers. Once she had been a mining pod, ferrying gasses and other volatiles from station to station all around cislunar space. Beauregard had bought her for a song, however, and then converted her huge internal volume into multi-decked short-hop passenger seating. *Aphrodite*, as Beauregard had renamed her, had far more power than was needed for the kind of start-and-stop work that she and I performed every day. However, her engines would last forever under such low demand, and otherwise she suited her new role perfectly.

There was even plenty of room for free advertising on her swollen, billboard-like flanks.

Everything came up green as I sipped on my cola, and soon Arnold was speaking to me over the intercom. "We're about ready out here," he said. "Just a couple more to strap down."

"Right," I agreed.

"It's a huge crowd," he added. "I've never seen anything like it. We've topped out."

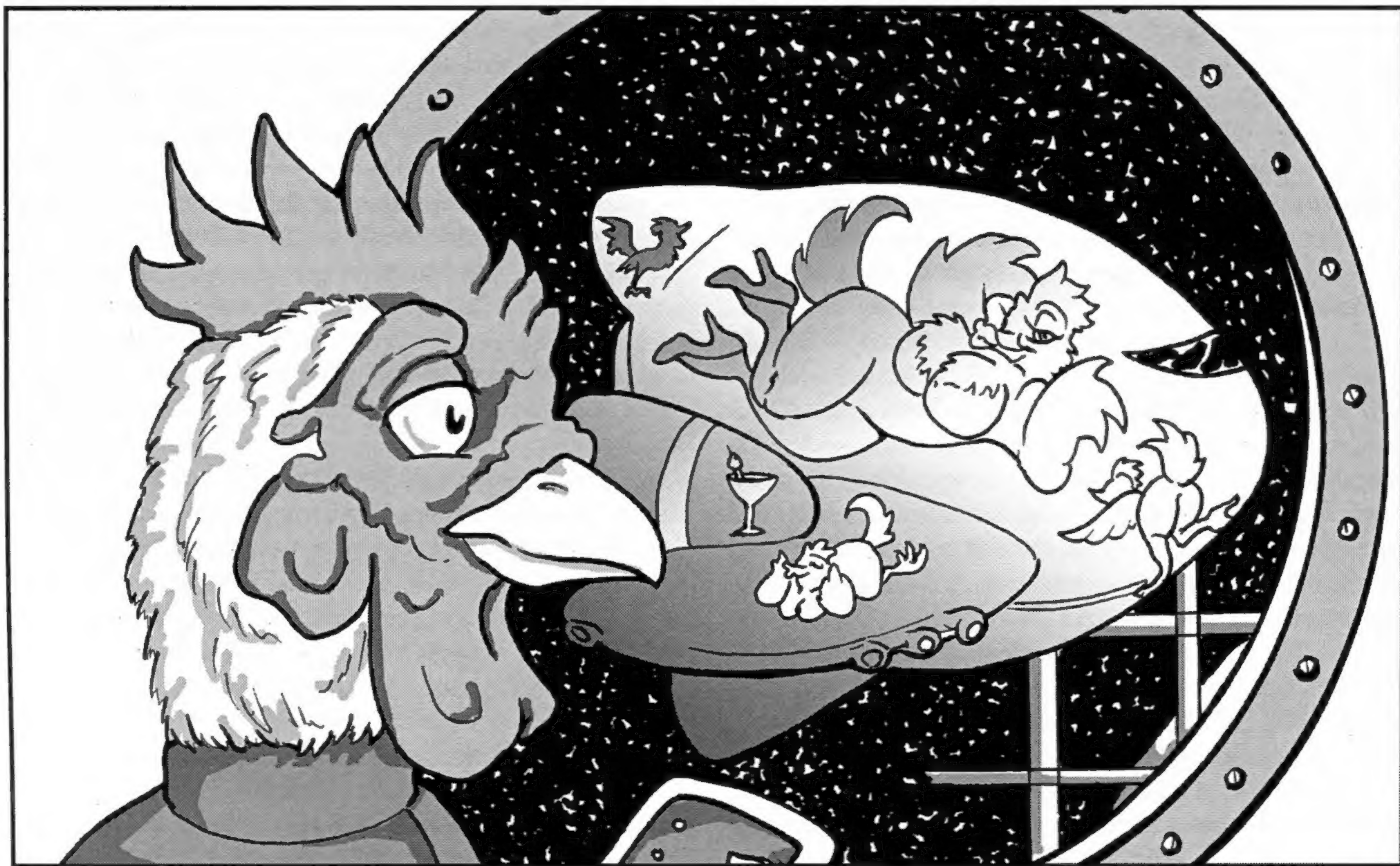


Illustration by Aura Moser

"Really?" I asked, checking my mass-meter. Sure enough, it indicated the largest figure that I'd ever recorded.

"Really," Arnold replied emphatically. "We'll have a full three hundred aboard the Henhouse. I actually had to turn people away. That's a first."

I shook my head. Three hundred? The Henhouse was just a collection of orbital shacks, really, assembled together into two equal masses and then spun about a center for gravity. It was certified safe for three hundred, I knew. But where would we put them all? And how could the girls possibly serve so many customers in a mere twelve hours?

Well, neither of those were my problems. I was just the pilot, after all. And the maintenance man. And the piano player, for the next twelve hours. "Three hundred," I agreed. "Well, Beauregard will be pleased, at least. Up ship in about five minutes?"

"About," Arnold agreed. "See you at home, hon." Then he made a kissing sound into the microphone, and switched off.

I sighed and shook my head before getting down to business. "PT-Sixty-Nine to Control," I said formally into the radio. "Peter Thomas-Six-Niner to Control. This is *Aphrodite*. Do you read me, over?"

"Poon Tang Six-Niner," a voice responded instantly. "This is Control. We have you loud and clear. Our computers have received your flight plan. Clearance is granted. You may fly the coop at will."

I clicked my beak together angrily. Damnit, I was a certified Command Navigator! I outranked this guy! Then I closed my eyes and counted ten. "Roger, Control" I replied, my voice cool and formal once more. I could be professional, even if no one else around Lagrange seemingly could. "I estimate departure in approximately three minutes. I will advise you when we up-ship."

"Roger," the voice replied. "We'll set our egg timer. Control out."

Once more my fists balled up. A launch was a launch, damnit, even it was just the Pussy Pod making a lousy hundred-click hop! This was serious business! There were human lives at stake! Then the door buzzer rang.

"Who is it?" I asked angrily. "What do you want?"

"Commodore Tottson," a very deep voice said from the other side of the hatch. "Commodore Tottson, come to pay his professional respects. Would you allow me the honor of cockpit privileges, sir?"

- III -

"Holy shit!" I cried out, leaping to my feet. No one had ever paid me a courtesy call before, least of all Commodore Tottson! Heart racing, I pressed the intercom button. "Of course, sir. It would be an honor." Frantically I leapt around the cockpit, straightening

papers and making sure that all was shipshape. Then I very carefully brushed back my comb, inhaled and exhaled slowly three times, and opened the hatch.

"Good afternoon," the Commodore greeted me in his deep bass tones. He extended his hand.

I took it in both of mine and shook it firmly. "Good afternoon," I repeated rather inanely. "I am deeply honored, sir."

He made a dismissive gesture. "The honor is all mine, Mr. Mackleschmidt." The Commodore paused for a moment. "I believe that we've rather gotten off on the wrong foot with each other. I've come to try and make things right."

My beak dropped open. The Commodore was apologizing? To *me*? "I... I..."

The big man smiled, flashing his perfect white teeth. "That, and I'll admit that I'm planning to cut off a little bit of trim, as well. I'm a single man, as you know. Deep space can be a mighty lonely place at times." He cocked his head to one side. "May I call you Marvin?"

Somewhere deep within my brain, important gears were spinning at high rates of speed without engaging anything at all. "Uh-huh," I replied dully.

"Great!" the Commodore replied. "I'm Alexander, or Alec to my friends." He looked at the copilot's chair, and I took my cue.

"Please," I gushed. "Please, be seated. Make yourself at home! I'm, uh, in final sequence and, uh..."

"Right," Tottson replied with nod. "Of course. I'll just sit and watch until we're under way."

I watched as he strapped himself in with practiced ease, then rang up Arnold. "How are the cattle doing?" I asked once I had him on the line.

"Just about... Wait! Peggy Sue is giving me the high sign now. You're clear on this end, Marvin."

"Roger," I acknowledged formally. "We are clear in the cabin." Then I checked in with Control. "This is Peter Thomas Six-Niner," I enunciated one last time. "I intend to up ship in three-zero seconds."

"Roger that," Control replied. "You are clear to fly, Poon Tang Six Niner. Another Venus expedition departs!"

"Those guys looked mighty horny to me, Poon Tang Six Niner!" an unknown voice added. "Watch out for Uranus!"

My eyes narrowed in rage; this was the usual drill whenever I left Lagrange, of course, and that was bad enough. But it was a hundred times worse with Commodore Tottson sitting beside me, silent as a sphinx. Once again, I forced myself to breathe naturally and behave like a professional. "Up ship in three, two, one... Now!" I declared as the computer released the docking ring at precisely the correct second.

In the old days, I knew, science fiction writers had predicted that transorbital craft like *Aphrodite* and

Excalibur would inevitably dock in the center of spinning stations like Lagrange, for ease of navigation. They had not, however, anticipated either the overcrowding that had developed at Lagrange's poles or the degree to which fusion power and high-speed computers would simplify the art of celestial navigation. Only the very heaviest and most unwieldy craft docked at the poles; there simply wasn't room for anyone else. All other traffic docked at the rim, where there was plenty of surface area and docking space was therefore cheaper. When the computer released our docking ring, *Aphrodite* was flung like a stone from a sling, and we went from one gee of acceleration to free-fall conditions in nothing flat.

It only lasted for a second or so, however; almost immediately *Aphrodite's* engines began to fire, and presently we were keeping station and watching Lagrange's huge hull spin merrily by. I turned to Tottson. "We're routed via the South Pole, sir" I informed him. "I didn't know that you were going to be aboard, but it worked out quite well."

He flashed his smile again. "Indeed."

Presently the computer fired the engines once more, and Lagrange's nearly featureless hull began to crab sideways beneath us. Then we were past the Rim and crossing over the station's ever-shadowed South Pole.

"Ah," I heard Tottson sigh in pride and satisfaction as we passed over his mining Fleet and the fruits of their last expedition. A dozen huge snowballs, each of them miles across, floated solemnly like oversized pearls in the shadows, waiting to be processed into air and fertilizer and water and all of the myriad other needs of spaceborne humanity. Two of the snowballs were very bluish in color.

"I still can't believe that you guys found methane out in the Kuiper," I said, the pure wonder of the sight loosening my tongue.

Tottson chuckled, a deep rumbling sound. "It's giving the astrophysicists fits," he acknowledged. "Even the refinery folks are having trouble dealing with the Blueberries. I don't care a whit, though. Those bergs are the richest ore that we've ever found. They'll support every Station in the sky for months, each of them. Next trip, I intend to seek out more of the same."

I nodded dreamily. The Kuiper was the far frontier of the human experience, the dividing line between what was known and what was unknown.

It was dreams of the Kuiper that kept my tongue civil when others were making wisecracks at my expense. "They're so very beautiful," I murmured.

"Yeah," Tottson agreed. "There's so much beauty in space. Far more than most people ever realize." Slowly we drifted past the Pole, and then the wondrous sight was gone. "There's a tremendous amount of wonder out here," Tottson said once his treasure trove had passed below the horizon. "Even for the Pussy Pilot."

I flinched visibly, but said nothing.

"I've taken the liberty of checking up a bit on you," Tottson continued remorselessly. "With Sister Mayberry and with a few others. You've had a pretty rough go of it."

I shrugged. "Mom and Dad were murdered," I explained. "It happens. You get over it."

"Yes," the Commodore agreed, peering at me intently. "You do." There was another long silence. "You're consistently at the top of your class, in pilotage matters at least. Yet this is the best job that you could find?"

"I don't have any connections," I replied honestly. "Most pilots, or at least most pilots who actually have jobs, are the sons or daughters or nieces or nephews of pilots." I turned and looked Tottson in the eye. "Your mother was a Command Navigator. A very fine one. Very well-connected, too."

He looked away. "Ouch," he said softly. "But it's true. So very true. We keep our little society very tightly closed. Too tightly, in my opinion."

"I might have found something better," I continued, "if I'd had the money to hold off just a little longer. But school's expensive. I had to take whatever was open, right away, or else default on Mrs. Mayberry. And that wouldn't exactly have been a proper way to thank her for helping along so much, now would it?"

"No," Tottson agreed. "I suppose not."

"And I want to be more than a pod pilot someday," I continued. "I want to go into deep space. Then beyond, even. You've heard the rumors about a star drive too, I'm sure."

The Commodore narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I've heard them." Then he paused a moment before continuing. "But son! You've had yourself made over into a *chicken*, for heaven's sake! You're the butt of half the jokes in the System, and you know it! Do you really imagine that you're ever going to be chosen to go interstellar after making a start like this?"



"You're consistently at the top of your class, in pilotage matters at least. Yet this is the best job that you could find?"

Once again, I shrugged. "You said it yourself, sir. I've made it ninety days without a single incident. In another ninety days, I'll with luck have made it half a year, and so forth. Even more, I'll have been honoring my debt to Mrs. Mayberry and thereby paying a pilot-Sister what I owe her. Would you rather have me try to pave my way to the stars by turning down paying work and defaulting on what I honestly owe?"

The Commodore pressed his lips together, then looked away and sighed. "I suppose not," he said eventually. "Not when you put it like that. But still..." He turned to face me. "Son, you have such promise. And you're throwing it all away!"

It was my turn to look away. "Maybe," I agreed after a time. "Maybe I am throwing away my future. But if so I'll have done it honestly according to my own lights, and in the end that what's matters most. It matters even more than the stars." I smiled weakly and fingered my beak; I still wasn't used to it, not really. "Besides, it's probably too late to worry about it now. Once the Pussy Pilot, always the Pussy Pilot."

"Heh!" Tottson's chuckle was a single explosive snort. We drifted along in silence for a while longer, and then the Commodore stood up to leave. "Well," he said at last, clasping his hand on my shoulder, "I can honestly say that I'm proud to have met you, son. You've made me think about some things that maybe I needed to think about."

It was against the rules for me to stand up while *Aphrodite* was under way, so I had to remain seated. I did, however, extend my hand one last time. "Sir," I said. "You've always been a hero to me. Thank you so much for coming by."

"It was my duty," Tottson replied, smiling again. "My duty in the greater sense of the word." He released my hand, but still clasped my shoulder. "Keep at it, son" he urged me. "Don't give up on school, and keep right on pecking away at what you owe. You'll get it paid off someday, and then you'll be free to move on."

I suddenly went stiff at Tottson's choice of words, and then he too realized what he'd done. "Shit," he mumbled, releasing my shoulder. "Damn! I mean..."

"It's all right," I said resignedly, turning back towards the forward port. "Don't worry; I'm pretty much used to it by now."

For just a moment longer Tottson stood stock still, trying to find something more to say. Then he finally slumped in defeat, clasped my shoulder one last time, and retreated to the main cabin.

Docking at the Henhouse was a far simpler matter than at Lagrange; since *Aphrodite* was the only pod to utilize the lock on anything like a regular basis, there wasn't any crowding at the axis and rim docking wasn't necessary. I stood by and watched carefully as the computer first spun us to exactly the same rate as our dumbbell-shaped destination, then eased us up

to the lock and latched on. "All secure," I said into the log recorder. Then I called up my friends at Lagrange. "Control, this is Poon—I mean, this is Peter Thomas Six-Niner," I intoned formally. "We are coupled and secure."

"Confirmed, Six-Niner" the controller acknowledged. "You are coupled and secure. I certainly hope that you're wearing a condom. Control out."

I sighed aloud, then powered everything down and slipped out before the cattle could begin their stampede into to the Rooster's Roost, our saloon. I made it, barely, the elevator door slamming shut in the face of the very first hungry-looking customer as he floated around the last corner. Perhaps my thumb on the override button had something to do with how quickly the door closed.

It was just as well that I'd made sure to be first. The Dragon was waiting for me at the other end of the docking tube, dressed in the full regalia of her specialty and ready to get to work. I winced at the sight; the Dragon was intimidating enough without her black leather hood, stiletto heels and whip. "Damnit, Marvin!" she exploded in my face before I could flinch away from the blast. "That fan that you fixed is squealing again! How am I to concentrate? Your work is miserable, you are disgusting and you are unfit to be a pilot!"

I closed my eyes and sighed; the Dragon was a petite little Cambodian girl, with attractive almond-shaped eyes and a nearly perfect face. She was also one of the most skilled dominatrixes in the entire System, and our highest-priced attraction. Even when not dressed for work she tended to pour out torrents of abuse at the slightest provocation. When all done up in leather, however, she was absolutely intolerable. The Dragon seemed to instinctively know what really hurt and what did not. Even worse, she didn't seem to care.

"I'll get right on it," I assured her. "Just give me a few minutes to—"

"You will do it now," the Dragon declared flatly, her eyes flashing behind the black mask. "And this time you will do it right, to my entire satisfaction." She fingered her whip threateningly.

Jeanine was standing just behind the Dragon; she was an ex-male with seven fully functional vaginas inset into various parts of her anatomy, and the nearest thing that the Dragon had to a friend. I met her eyes and she nodded slightly, then placed her hand on the Dragon's leather-clad shoulder. "All right," I agreed. "I'll go make my walkaround, then get right on it. I *have* to do the walkaround, for safety reasons. You know that, don't you?"

The Dragon looked at me suspiciously. I was technically the captain of the Henhouse, as the only certified pilot and able spacer. The dominatrix knew this, though it pained her deeply to be reminded of it. "All



right," she agreed at last, placing her black-gloved hand delicately over Jeanine's. "But this time, you *will* fix it properly!"

"Yes, ma'am" I agreed humbly. Then I climbed the drop-shaft just as quickly as I possibly could. I got quite enough abuse just being the Pussy Pilot, *thankyouverymuch*... I didn't need any help from the Dragon.

"Hey Marvin!" Marilyn called out as I tried to sneak past the bar. "Wait up a minute!"

I sighed and complied, even though the first elevator-load of guests was already making its way down to our level. "What?" I asked, probably more abruptly than was necessary.

Marilyn pouted her lips. She was a living replica of Marilyn Monroe, and the effect was impressive. "It's nothing," she said softly. "Just that you're due for a pill. And that I was hoping you could play something special for me tonight."

Oops! I'd forgotten all about the pill. The Rooster's Roost sold a lot more than just alcohol, much of it in the form of various traditional powders to be inhaled. There were hallucinogens, amphetamines, downers, and a thousand different aphrodisiacs of varying qualities and potency. As our customers grew more and more inebriated, they tended to become quite sloppy with their drugs. Anyone who worked anywhere in the Henhouse had to take a special pill once a week lest the second-hand effects render them hors de combat just when they were needed most. I smiled at Marilyn with the flexible corners of my beak, then took the proffered pill and followed it down with a cup of cold water. "Thanks," I said. "What do you need me to play for you?"

"'Happy Birthday'" is all," she explained modestly. "Just at midnight. It's for a very special customer, you see. I'd use a recording, but..."

"Right," I agreed, nodding sadly. I had a love-hate relationship with the piano these days. I'd always been a moderately talented pianist, and loved the instrument deeply. Indeed, Beauregard had spent a lot more time listening to my piano playing than checking out my piloting credentials before hiring me. On the other hand, I'd never exactly aspired to be a whorehouse pianist, and even worse it was because of my musical abilities that Beauregard had inserted the chicken-thing into my contract. The only good thing about it was that it earned me some extra pay that I needed very, very badly. "I'll take care of it for you, Mar" I said with a smile.

"Right at midnight!" she insisted. "Please?"

"Unless I have to be somewhere else," I promised. "You know how that goes."

She dimpled, just exactly like her namesake. "Sure," she replied. "We all understand, Marvin. You work so very hard!" Then she threw me a kiss, and I sort of melted inside. There were probably a thousand Marylins working in the bordellos of the

System, I thought to myself as I dropped down through the boudoir level and into the tiny control room. Maybe more than a thousand. But ours was certainly the sweetest.

Interplanetary safety standards required that certain automatic readings be verified manually at least once a day, and I usually took care of this chore right after docking. The Henhouse was equipped with the two widely-separated duplicate control rooms required by the same law, but I almost always took my readings in this one. That was because the duplicate control room was in the Henhouse's other half, which nowadays was almost never

occupied. It was taken up with various storerooms, tankage, air plants and the like, along with the now-defunct and derelict gay bar. Indeed, probably no one ever visited the other half at all except me on my standard monthly checks. The last time that I'd visited the other control room, everything had been covered in a thin film of dust.

Today everything checked out quickly; the machines' readings agreed with my own down to three decimal places. The intercom rang just as I was finishing up. "It's the Dragon," Jeanine whispered into the phone. In the background I could hear a woman's voice screaming incoherently in rage, along with the sound of things crashing and breaking. "She's supposed to be trussing up her first client right about now, and I think she's a little upset at the delay."

"Right," I agreed, allowing my head to collapse up against a bulkhead. "I'll be right up."

Our star dominatrix was indeed a little upset, I could tell when I climbed up the single flight of stairs to The Dungeon. Various bits of porcelain and plastic littered the normally spic-and-span floor, and the Dragon herself was exercising her whip, making it snap and crackle in a blood-curdling fashion as I stepped in.

"The damn thing is still squeaking!" she declared angrily, not deigning to face me. "I am supposed to be humiliating five of the most disgustingly inferior creatures that I've ever attempted to train! How can



**"She's
supposed to be
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I possibly work amidst all of this clamor? I am an artist, not a mere whore!"

I cocked my head and listened. Sure enough, there was a faint, intermittent "squeak, squeak, squeak" emerging from the Dragon's main air vent. One of the air system's primary blowers was located just behind her wall, I knew. I'd fixed a very similar problem with a squirt of oil just last Tuesday. Somehow, though, this squeak sounded a bit different than that one had. I twisted the lock nuts on the access panel ninety degrees, then swung it open.

There was dust and dirt everywhere; what a mess! The electro-filter had failed utterly, and so much crud had built up that the motor was overheating. "Geez!" I muttered under my breath. "What a lousy time for this happen!"

The Dragon turned imperiously towards me and raised a single elegant eyebrow behind her black mask.

"Look," I said defensively. "This is gonna take maybe an hour. There's no choice; the air system is the air system, after all. I can't just put it back like it was."

"All right," she replied.

I let out a relieved sigh. She might be so far around the bend that there wasn't any looking back, but at least the Dragon understood about the need for air in space. "I'll have to replace the filter," I explained. "Then, once I clean up the crud around the motor, everything will probably work just fine. There's a spare part up in storage."

"I understand," she replied, turning her back once more. "What more can one expect from an insignificant worm such as yourself?" Then she turned to Jeanine. "Come," she directed. "We will relocate temporarily into Christine's old room. I am an artist; I can improvise." Then they both were gone, and I was able to work in peace at last. It was very difficult to get anything done with the Dragon looking over my shoulder, very difficult indeed.

It was just as well that the Dragon had decided to relocate her Dungeon for the evening, I decided as I began to dig through the accumulated filth. The filter was complete toast, and I had to remove it entirely from its mounting. This required me to reroute the airflow system, redirecting the ventilation through some seldom-used ducting on the other end of the station. Once that was done I was able to remove the filter without having the build-up of dust and dirt blasted all over the Dragon's precious torture equipment, a calamity whose dire consequences I had absolutely no intentions of suffering through.

It was fortunate that the control room was located just under the Dungeon; all of the really kinky stuff was kept as far as possible towards the ends of the Henhouse so that those with relatively conventional tastes need not deal with the more abstruse sexual

desires of our other guests. I'd just entered the control room in order to verify with the computer that I indeed had a spare electro-filter in stock when all hell broke loose.

It started with a radio call on the Red frequency, which was reserved for life-threatening events. "Emergency!" the desperate sounding voice called out. "Emergency at the South—" Then the voice was cut off in a burst of static.

Instantly I dropped the filter on the counter and forgot about it. "Repeat!" I demanded into the microphone. "This is the Henhouse. Repeat your emergency call!"

There was a long silence. Then another voice spoke up. "Oh my God!" the woman on the other end said softly. "It's going up. All of it! There's been a whole series of explosions; I don't think there's going to be any survivors. Goddamn Blueberries! This is Barbara Mitchell. If you hear my voice, please tell my family that—" Then she too was cut off in a burst off static.

Suddenly adrenaline was flooding into my system by the gallon. "What the hell's going on?" demanded yet another voice. "This is Peter Thomas four-seven, *Collins*, inbound from Solarium Three. I repeat, what the hell? There's debris all over!"

There was a long moment of silence, until Control's voice finally spoke up. "All inbounds," the voice began. "This is Lagrange Station control. For the past several minutes there has been—"

Lagrange may have finished their sentence, but I never got to hear it. Suddenly the Henhouse was struck a terrific, terrible blow, knocking me off of my feet and slamming me into the far wall. I struck head-first, stunning me slightly. A precious second passed while I shook off the blow, until an icepick of pain in both of my ears caused my training to kick in. In a flash was up and moving automatically. The pressure was dropping like a rock! I was about to find myself breathing vacuum!

All of the internal doors of the Henhouse were designed to be airtight, and the Control Room door was already beginning to close itself. Red warning lights were flashing everywhere, and the air was foggy from the sudden pressure drop. I forced myself to face directly into the teeth of the wind, and pulled myself through the closing portal so quickly that I drifted yards down the hallway before finding a handrail that I could use to stop my movement. Behind me the door slid solidly shut, and suddenly the terrible roar of rushing air faded away to nothing. My chest was heaving as I floated next to my handgrip, more from my close call than from momentary lack of air. I must have been very frightened indeed, because I'd taken at least four or five such breaths before I realized that I was floating in a place where I should have been standing, and it was two or three



more breaths beyond that before I came to appreciate just how incredibly bad a sign that was.

Instantly I was on the move again, once I recognized that we must have suffered structural damage on an almost incomprehensible level. Somehow the part of the Henhouse in which I was standing had come adrift from the rest, I was slowly realizing, and therefore was no longer spinning for gravity.

We didn't seem to be losing any more air, or if we were at least it wasn't being lost very rapidly. Therefore, my first job was to inform myself of what was going on and how badly the Henhouse was damaged. I couldn't exactly get into the Control Room right at the moment; by now it was chock-full of hard vacuum. And I had a sick feeling that the other Control Room, located at the extreme opposite end of the Henhouse so as to ensure that one or the other would always be functional, was equally unavailable. So I decided to fall back on more primitive methods. The first boudoir on the left had a large porthole, I knew, and I tore the door open without knocking. A semi-human voice cried out in terror when I did so, and then was joined by a second.

"It's all right," I reassured the room's occupants automatically, my training kicking in once more. Alarming the passengers was a very bad thing to do.

"Please, it's all right. I just need to look around here a little bit."

I was in the Menagerie, I realized suddenly, the boudoir where Trixie and Myrna plied their rather unusual trade. The fox and rabbit girls were curled up in a sort of little furball up against the far bulkhead, while their current client, who was dressed up in a sensation-suit to look like an oversized teddy bear, spun helplessly in mid-air. He looked rather as if he wanted to scream, but he was gagged much too tightly to allow for that sort of thing.

I had no time to spare for the client, however, nor even any for Trixie and Myrna, who were usually so nice to me. Instead I kicked skillfully off of the nearest object—a toy box full of big rubber balls and real teddy bears and such—that was solidly affixed to the deck. Inadvertently I knocked the lid ajar, and slowly the room began to fill with oversized child's toys as I glided across to the port.

Things were bad, I realized once I was able to force my mind to comprehend what my eyes were seeing. Very, very bad. Much of the Henhouse was quite simply gone; we had been sliced almost precisely in two at the narrow point where the long central shaft connected the two groups of orbital shacks. Our docking point was gone as well, and with it *Aphrodite*. We

were tumbling, and the stars were near-streaks across my field of vision.

"Jesus Christ!" I whispered under my breath. "What the hell happened?"

Suddenly Lagrange Station itself swept across my view, and my question was at least partially answered by the fleeting glimpse I caught of her. Lagrange's skin was peeled back like an onion's around the South Pole, and even as I watched there was an intense flash of light from somewhere in that region. Bits and pieces of wreckage were everywhere, and for them to be visible at such a distance even the smallest must have weighed tons. It was incredible! The explosions must have been colossal, and we'd been unlucky enough to catch a packet of debris from one of the very first.

"Marvin?" Trixie's trembling voice asked.

I turned to face her. Her ears were lowered in fear, and her eyes were open very, very wide. "Yes?"

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I clicked my beak together, trying to figure out how to answer. "There's been accident," I replied at last. "A bad one, aboard Lagrange."

"Uh-huh," she replied, though from her posture I didn't think that she was really listening my words so much as the tone that they were spoken in.

So I tried to sound confident for her. "We've been hit hard," I said. "But we're not losing air. I think we're going to be all right." Then I cocked my head and looked at the fox and rabbit girls critically. "Neither of you are steward-trained, are you?"

Their eyes met for a moment, then they looked back at me. "No," Myrna replied, speaking for them both. "We're too heavily morphed for that."

I nodded. "Right." No one who was less than ninety-five percent physically human could be rated as spacecrew in any capacity, for a wide variety of reasons. I'd forced Beauregard to make me far less a chicken than he'd wanted to by waving that very fact in his face. Trixie and Myrna were both a lot less than ninety-five percent human. "All right," I said to them, trying to maintain my calm, reassuring tone. "Arnold is rated a Chief Steward. Get on the intercom and find him for me, please. Then have him round up all of the other stews and get the cattle under control."

"Right!" Trixie said, looking very relieved at having something to do. The pair leapt off in a flash, leaving me alone with the gagged, handcuffed teddy bear. I looked at him for a moment; his eyes were very

wide open and frightened, too. Then I shrugged and left him slowly drifting about amidst the other toys. Someone else would have to deal with the bear; I was far too heavily engaged with other urgent business.

By this time the corridors were already turning into bedlam, the gravity having failed without any warning at all. Drunken, stoned, heavily aphrodisiac-ed johns were floating about the Henhouse in various states of undress and arousal.

One especially single-minded and naked individual was attempting to complete his business with Patrice out in front of God and everybody, and she was having an unusual degree of difficulty in fighting him off in the absence of gravity. Fortunately another girl was standing nearby; I snatched the pair of fur-lined handcuffs that she was holding right out of her hands, then after a very brief struggle snapped them onto the miscreant's right ankle and left wrist. He was just an ordinary guy drugged out of his mind, I knew. Tomorrow he'd be deeply ashamed of having behaved so badly in the face of an emergency. Still, we simply *had* to have

order. "Get these johns locked up in one of the boudoirs!" I directed Marian. "Do whatever it takes. Lock them up, strap them down, whatever!"

"Right!" she agreed, just as Winifred drifted by, kicking out frantically with all four hooves and baa-ing like a lost soul.

"And get that damned sheep locked up too!" I ordered. "Hell, put her in the menagerie!"

"First thing!" Marian agreed. I certainly hoped that they took out the teddy-bear guy first, but right at the moment I didn't have time to be terribly choosy.

When I found another boudoir with a porthole on the other side of the Henhouse, this one mercifully deserted, I finally was able to make out at least one bit of good news. *Aphrodite* was still lingering nearby, it seemed, still locked to her dock. However, the dock was no longer attached to the rest of the station, and the whole affair was drifting perhaps a hundred meters out, spinning slowly in the opposite direction from us. She seemed to be receding a little, as well, albeit very, very slowly. As near as I could see, my pod's hull was seemingly intact.

Arnold called me over the intercom, just then, interrupting my thoughts. "Marvin?" he asked. "Have I finally found you?"

Instantly I pounced on the little red-lighted button. "Marvin here. It's good to hear your voice, Arnold! Is everything all right in the saloon?"

"Right!" she agreed, just as Winifred drifted by, kicking out frantically with all four hooves and baa-ing like a lost soul.

"Hah! Marvin, it's bedlam up here! The drug canisters broke free when we got hit, and the goddamn powder is everywhere! Everyone except the staff is high as a kite; the goddamn johns don't even know their names any more. I think the air filtration's down."

I clicked my beak angrily. "Damn it, there's supposed to be safety clips on those lids! There *are* safety clips on those lids; I've inspected them myself!"

"And you've never tried to serve two hundred guests all at once, either!" the big man replied angrily. "The clips get in the goddamn way!" Then his voice mellowed a little. "Marvin, the truth is that we're in over our heads up here; I've completely lost control. They're high, they're drunk, they're horny, and it's getting worse by the second. Some of them are already fighting, and others..." His voice turned into a whisper. "Marvin, I just witnessed a rape, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. Not a damn thing"

I nodded, though I knew that Arnold couldn't see me. "Right," I agreed, once more trying to sound confident and in-control for the sake of my subordinate. "I understand, Arnold. There's only so much you can do. I'll be getting the filters back on line just as soon as I can."

"They'll be stoned for hours regardless," Arnold answered. "God, Marvin, what are we going to do? Can we get help from Lagrange?"

"I'm working on that," I replied calmly. "And I'm working on the air, too. You just maintain as much order as you possibly can up there, Arnold, and hold out. I'll be up soon. All right?"

"All right," he replied, sounding a bit more confident at last. "But Marvin... These drugs can be toxic, you know, if the doses are large enough. And you can't hardly see up here for all the stuff in the air."

I nodded; he was right. Air filtration was now my highest priority. "I'm working on it, Arnold" I said again. "I'll send help when I can. Marvin out."

- IV -

Winifred was still baa-ing and kicking out in the corridor as I passed by, though three of the girls were making a valiant effort at getting her under control. The only johns in sight were all handcuffed or strapped neatly to railings, and each was efficiently and effectively gagged. I grabbed one of them by the hair and turned his head to face me; the man's eyes were glazed badly, I could see, and the pupils mere pinpoints. Clearly, the effects of the drugs were spreading quickly. Then I turned to look down the long corridor; there was a faint white mist in the air.

"All right," I said decisively, pointing to the nearest three girls. "You, you and you. I need help fixing the air system. Come with me." Then I turned and



darted down the hallway, not giving them a chance to argue.

There were two separate reasons why our air was no longer being filtered, I knew. One was that much of the air plant had been located on the detached other half of the Henhouse. The other was that, through the most cursed of luck, I'd been busily engaged in changing a filter when everything had gone south. I'd temporarily rerouted various vents to make my job easier, I remembered, though it suddenly seemed like it had happened a thousand years ago...

...and had left the only filtering element in our half of the ship in the control room, where it was now totally unavailable.

I froze in mid leap at the realization, and then the Dragon slammed into me from behind. "You incompetent fool!" she cursed as we tumbled down the passage together, end over end. "Why did you stop short like that?"

"My fault," I murmured as I untangled myself from the leather-clad woman. "I'm sorry!"

Her narrow eyes glowed in rage, then blinked twice. "It was my fault too, perhaps" she said. "I am informed that you are on your way to repair the air filtration system. That is what you took apart in my dungeon, is it not?"

"Yes," I answered.

She nodded soberly. "Then perhaps I might be of use? Finding things and the like? No one knows the Dungeon like me."

I cocked my head to one side; ordinarily the Dragon was the last person I liked to have around when I was working on something. Yet she seemed to have a much clearer head than any of the other girls. "Right," I agreed decisively. "You're my assistant. Got it?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I will help in any way that I am able." With a surprisingly lithe motion the Dragon caught a railing under her spike heel, using it as an anchoring point to halt our slow rotation. Then she pushed us off together down towards her working quarters. "I have worked in zero-gee environments before," she explained. "In other establishments, for other employers."

She moved beautifully, I had to agree. Carefully I separated myself from her, then almost simultaneously we grabbed the doorway and pivoted, making our way inside. Our three helpers followed with considerably less grace.

The Dungeon was an absolute mess; I'd left the electric blower motor encased in dust, and my tools were nowhere to be seen. Right in the center of the mess was a big cavity, where the filter itself had once been mounted.

"All right," I said aloud, as much to steady myself as anything. "What we have to do here is first to clean things up. If all of this dust gets into the air, we're

going to have even more troubles than we've already got." I turned to the Dragon. "I need some kind of bag."

She cocked her head to the side for a moment, then turned to Gwen, one of our youngest and newest Artists. "You!" she declared, snapping her fingers. "In the green cabinet! Get me one of the black bags there! Now!"

Instantly Gwen leapt to obey, and in seconds I was holding a large body-shaped nylon bag, just about large enough, I judged, to be used to encase a recalcitrant slave. It held dust just fine, however. "Find my tools," I directed as I began to scoop the soft gray goo up into the sack. "They are the last ones aboard. Most likely they've drifted off."

"You and you!" the Dragon demanded, snapping her fingers once more. "Search the Dungeon immediately! You, go out and look in the corridor!"

It took several long minutes for me to get things cleaned up, and I used the time to try and plan ahead. The blower motor in front of me was the last one of any size aboard the Henhouse, I knew; the rest of the big ones had all been located on the station's other half. So had the rest of the filters. The filter box itself had been a rather complex bit of plumbing, with a high-pressure inlet and four outlets that led to other levels. The filter box was gone, utterly gone; there was simply no way that I could get into the Control Room anytime soon. Somehow I'd have to improvise both the filter and the plumbing. But how?

I'd almost finished scooping dust when there was a clatter at the door. It was my toolbox, thank heavens, the hard metal objects inside rattling about freely in zero-gee. "It's only about half-full," Michelle explained contritely as she held it out to me. "I don't think we found everything."

Indeed they had not, but they had done a far better job than I'd hoped for. I had a screwdriver, a large pair of locking pliers, and several wrenches to work with. "Thank you!" I replied sincerely, looking up and smiling. I floated the box conveniently nearby, then turned back to confront the gaping hole in the air system with new confidence.

No ideas on how to actually make a repair, however, presented themselves.

After a long moment, the Dragon spoke up. "You are fixing this, yes?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes. I *must* fix it. But I'm not quite certain as to how. I'm missing a major part."

There was a long silence, then the Dragon edged up alongside of me to where she could get a clear view. "You need a part for where the air blows out," she said, "to get it into those other four pipes?"

"Right," I agreed. "Plus, we need to improvise some kind of filter media. It doesn't have to be sophisticated, just enough to get most of the crap out of the air."

"Hmm." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then went darting away.

The damned pipes were in just about the worst of all possible configurations, I mused to myself while she was gone. They emerged from the filter box at ninety-degree angles. How was I going to handle the junctions? I might be able to rig up a box as a filter, but..."

Just then the Dragon returned, thrusting something soft and pink into my face. "Try this!" she ordered. "Will it work?"

I clicked my beak together angrily, then inhaled and exhaled a couple of times to maintain self control before looking at what the dominatrix had brought me. It was an inflatable toy sex doll. For a moment I wanted to laugh, then realization set in. I had to go from a main trunk to four vents...

My eyes widened; by god, it just might work at that! "Maybe," I answered cautiously. "There's going to be a lot of air pressure..."

"Guys bounce up and down on these things all of the time," Michelle said. "They're made tough. They have to be!"

"Hmm," I said thoughtfully. "We could stuff the torso with pantyhose, and maybe make a filter that way. But how about the seals?" I pointed to the stub-pipe coming off of the main blower. "How am I going to make that work?"

There was a long moment of silence, and then Georgia came through. "Latex!" she declared. "Liquid latex! I have some of the really good stuff for a special client. I'll go and get it!" And she was off.

Pretty soon most of the girls aboard the Henhouse were off collecting pantyhose, while the Dragon and I cut and pasted and stuffed as appropriate. The stub-pipe indeed proved to be the most difficult connection; we applied latex lavishly and thought nice thoughts about the modern chemical industry. Then finally everything was dry, and it was time to test our repair. I looked over at the Dragon. "Here's hoping," I said, my hand on the switch.

"It will hold," she declared flatly. "It will."

I nodded; of course, a mere rubber dummy would *never* defy the express wishes of the mighty Dragon! I turned our improvised system on, and slowly the motor began to turn. "Plastic Patty", as her packaging declared her to be, began to take shape almost immediately. First the limp head stood erect and looked out over the world with unblinking blue eyes, and then her breasts began to inflate with excitement over the never-ending flood now pouring into her crotch. Almost immediately she began twitching and bouncing up and down, her mouth a little circle of eternal surprise, as air and more air flooded in and was filtered in her ample belly, only to go pouring out of her truncated arms and legs.

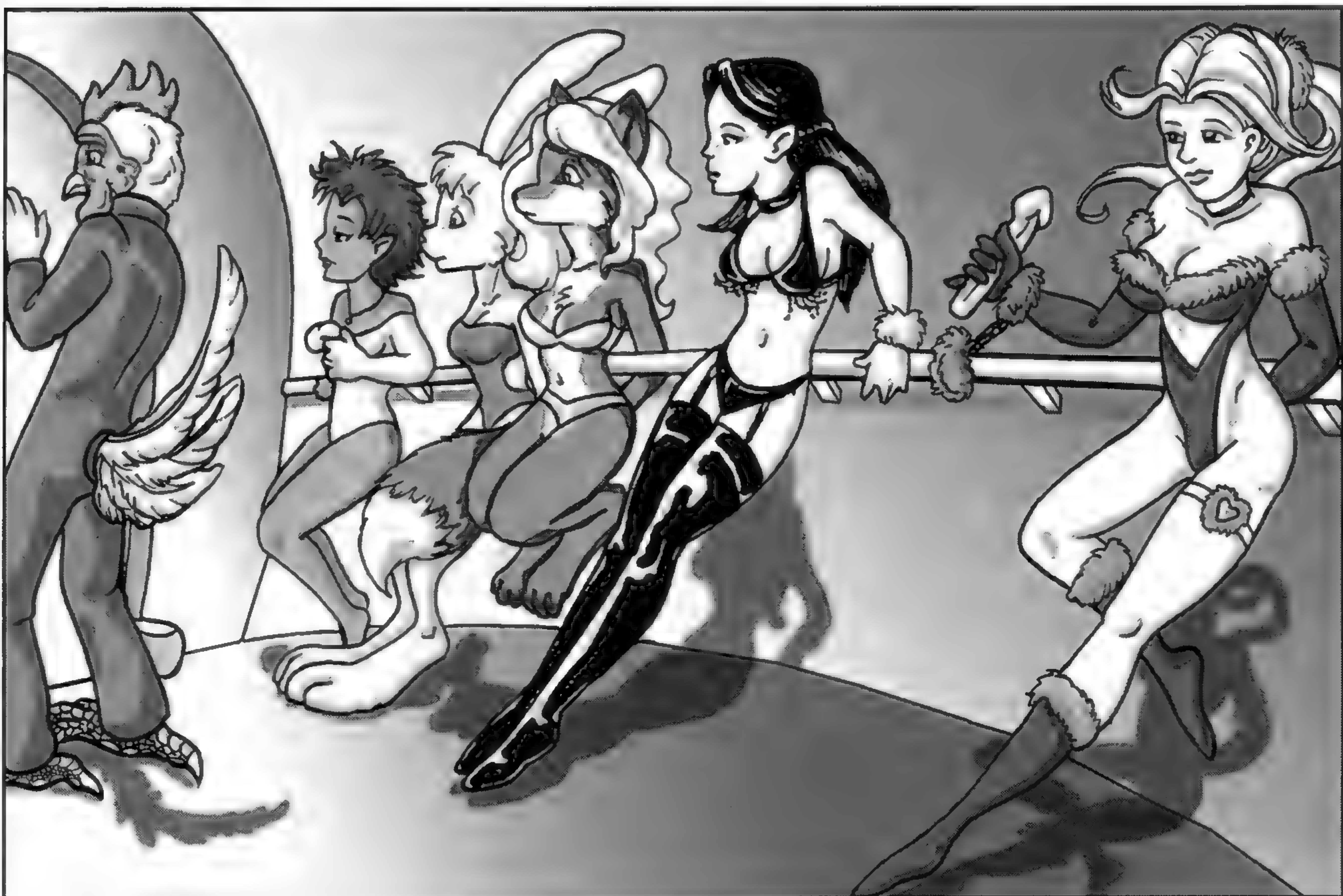


Illustration by Aura Moser

I shook my head sadly at the sight; the obscene thing would have gotten expelled from piloting school in a heartbeat, that was certain enough. But it seemed to be working, and for the moment that was plenty good enough.

"All right," I said, turning away just as soon as I was fairly certain that the repair would hold for a while. "That's the best we're going to do here, I think. Now, we've got work on problem number two."

"And that is?" the Dragon asked.

"Getting back into the Control Room, so that we can call for help."

There wasn't any elegant, safe method of regaining access to the Control Room, or at least there wasn't one that any of us could think of. Instead, we had to do things the hard way. "All right, everyone!" I declared. "Are you all tied down?"

Up and down the corridor, attractive feminine heads nodded in the affirmative. Each and every one of my helpers had been issued a pair of fur-lined handcuffs with matching key, and each and every woman was now firmly attached to the handrail. A hurricane was about to blow down the hall, and I didn't want to lose anyone.

"All right," I repeated. "Does everyone have their patching materials ready?"

Again the heads bobbed solemnly, some of the ladies holding up various oddments that we thought might suffice to plug a leak. "One last time, then" I continued. "When I give the word, and only when I give the word, you are to do what?"

"Release ourselves," the Dragon said for the rest. "Then follow you into the Control Room."

"We are to stuff our patching materials into any hull breaches," Trixie the bunny-girl continued. "However, if you say to pull out, we are to run for it just as fast as we can. If you say to run for it, it's because you think the holes are too big to fix."

"Right," I agreed. I'd run them through the procedure over and over again, until I was absolutely certain that everyone understood. "I'm going to open the hatch now. It will seem very frightening, but actually it takes quite a long time for a place as big as the Henhouse to lose enough air to really matter through just a few small holes." I turned and put my hand on the control lever. "One, two... Three!"

Convulsively I closed the override switch, and the door began to rise. Sure enough, the wind howled and blew, snatching varied bits of trash and sucking it greedily under the door. I felt my own body surge towards the opening, but was easily able to hold my position without depending on the cuffs despite being closest of all. Perhaps requiring everyone to lock themselves in place had been overkill, I now judged. However, I hadn't had any way to know for sure until the door actually opened.

The wind was still blowing hard when the hatch was half-open, but not so hard as to indicate that, say, an entire section of hull had been blown out. Carefully I unlocked myself, then ducked under the still not fully raised door. The lights were still working, I could see at once, which was a major blessing. There were two significant holes in plain sight, each perhaps three or four centimeters in diameter. They weren't enough to account for all the air wastage, not by half. Still, they were as good a place to start as any. "Come on in!" I roared against the gale, pumping my arm in the up-and-down gesture that we'd agreed upon. "Come on in and get these leaks plugged!"

The girls leapt into action almost instantly, and in thirty seconds or less Michelle was hanging beside me trying to stuff a can of hair spray into one of the holes. It didn't fit, being too large, so Michelle stood aside and let Trixie have a try. She was carrying a double-handful of oddly shaped cosmetics bottles, and one by one she tried stuffing them into the breach as well. All were too small. Then something long and hard was pressed into my hand from behind. "Here!" the Dragon called out. "Try this!"

I looked down; the Dragon had just passed me a neon-blue plastic phallus. I turned towards her "What in the hell am I supposed to do with this?" I cried out over the shrieking wind.

"Stuff it in the hole, you young idiot!" she shouted back, balling up her fists angrily. "Don't you know anything?"

I shrugged and turned back to face the breach. Sure enough, the shaft of the phallus fit the hole almost perfectly, and the base served as a very nice seal. "Latex!" I cried out. "Latex here!"

Georgia stepped forward dutifully, brush at the ready. While she was slathering away, I turned my attention to the next hole, just a meter or so away. It was about the same size as the first. "Get me another dildo!" I demanded, still shouting over the roar of the wind. "I need another dildo, fast!"

The second patch worked as well as the first, and then we used up two more phalluses on similar-sized holes located behind the suit storage locker. Once we had these last major breaches plugged, I knew that the fight was essentially won. "All right!" I declared again. "Ladies, you need to use your ears! Listen for whistling sounds, then home in on them. Stuff something appropriate in the hole, and then call for latex. I'm going to get to work."

"Right," the Dragon agreed. "Georgia, stand back and wait for the command. Loretta, you go back and hunt down more patches. Trixie, use those big ears, all right? Point out the leaks for us."

I nodded appreciatively at the dominatrix, who seemed to have things well in hand, and then turned my attention to the radio. It had not been damaged that I could see by a few minutes exposure to hard

vacuum. Whatever had made the holes in our hull, however, had taken out the speaker box along the way. Reflexively, I opened up the emergency cabinet and pulled on the backup headphones. Instantly a sea of voices surged into my head.

"No, Jim! Move the boom the other way!"

"The goddamn hatch is frozen solid. Has anyone got a torch? This one is hot, people! I've got trapped victims!"

"Fucking Blueberries!"

Carefully I clicked my mike. "Mayday, Mayday" I declared as calmly as I could. "This is Marvin Mackleschmidt in command of the Henhouse, declaring a Class One emergency. We have sustained catastrophic structural damage, and are short on air. There are three hundred souls aboard. Mayday, Mayday!"

"Get off the emergency frequency, Henhouse!" an angry-sounding female voice declared. "This channel has been allocated for rescue workers for the duration."

"Roger that, Henhouse" a new voice said, from what was clearly a more powerful radio. "Son, we're glad to hear from you. You need to go to channel four, however. All emergencies are being declared there."

"Roger," I acknowledged, feeling vaguely guilty even though there was no way that I possibly could have known. Using the emergency channel for rescue work wasn't in the procedure books, not at all. Though it made sense, I supposed, given all the little emergency-channel-only handsets that were distributed all over the place for occasions like this one. By the time that I had flipped my set over, the new voice was waiting for me.

"Henhouse," it asked. "Marvin, are you there?"

"Yes," I replied. "This is Marvin."

"Thank God," the man on the other end said wearily. "Marvin, this is Colonel LeClerc of Traffic Control. At least there's one bit of good news today. Frankly, son, when you vanished off the air we thought that we'd lost you all."

"You still might," I replied. "Sir, I am officially reporting a Class One emergency. We are heavily damaged, as you've probably already seen, and have lost gravity. We've also suffered at least four major hull breaches in addition to the structural failure. My instrumentation is not reliable at this time; while I am showing no other breaches on the Christmas tree I frankly doubt that this is the case. There's just too much debris out there for us not to have caught at least a couple more small pieces. Additionally, there has been, ah... A chemical spill, let's call it. Our air is foul, and growing fouler. The passengers are rioting, and we've been unable to restore order in large parts of the station."

"Roger, Henhouse" the Colonel replied. "Your emergency is formally logged. However..." He sighed. "Marvin, I'm going to be totally honest with

you. I don't have a single damned thing to send your way. We've experienced some kind of explosion at the South Pole refining facility, and things are way past the nightmare stage. There are thousands of dead here, Marvin. Thousands. There are more thousands trapped in isolated airtight compartments, most of them without radios or beacons." He sighed. "Plus, we're evacuating the whole station. We don't project that a single sector is going to remain habitable."

My beak snapped shut angrily. "There's three hundred souls trapped here!" I shouted. "Look, damnit! Just because we're a goddamned whorehouse doesn't mean that--"

"Whoa!" the Colonel interrupted me. "Hold your horses, son! If you'd called in right away after the blast, I might have been able to vector something out to you. But there's debris drifting all over God's creation now, and navigation has become an unholy nightmare close in. You're a pilot, son! How fast would you push *your* pod in this mess? And we can't afford to lose a pod just now, not a single one." He sighed. "If I could help you, I would. But the fact is, in the time that it would take me to get a pod out to you I can shuttle seven or eight hundred refugees out to where we're setting up emergency shacks." He sighed again. "I'm leveling with you, man to man. The fact of the matter is, we're not going to get everyone out of Lagrange proper in time, much less anyone else. No one ever foresaw a disaster this big. Therefore, we're not prepared for it." He sighed wearily. "Son, you're on your own."

- V -

In Command Navigator training, there is a short classroom segment on the art of leadership in an emergency. I inhaled and exhaled twice rather than scream obscenities at Colonel LeClerc the way that I so badly wanted to. I was not alone, after all, and the women who surrounded me were all working hard under my orders, doing their very best to salvage this impossible situation. So instead of cursing I simply signed off in calm, correct terms.

"When is the shuttle coming?" asked the Dragon as soon as I removed the headset. "How are they going to dock onto us?"

I smiled carefully. "Things are kind of busy back on Lagrange," I explained. "I'm not sure when they're coming. In the meantime, it might be quicker for me to try and go get *Aphrodite* myself."

The dominatrix cocked her head slightly to one side and scowled, but said nothing. "All right," she agreed. "Where is your suit?"

"Well," I said slowly. "There's just one wee little problem there..."

"Beauregard!" Michelle hissed. "He was too cheap to buy you a special suit after he made you change your body, wasn't he?"

"No!" I corrected her. "He bought me three, just like regulations required. One of them is over in *Aphrodite*," I explained.

"A lot of good that one will do you," Georgia observed. "Where are the other two?"

"One is kept in each control area. So, that means that one went with the other half of the station."

"Right," Michelle agreed, looking around and not finding what she sought. "So the last one is right here in this room. Great!" She smiled. "Where?"

I smiled weakly and pointed. "In that cabinet right over there. The one with the two great big shrapnel holes in it." Carefully I reached over and tried to open the door; it fell clean off of its hinges. Then a cloud of broken helmet-fragments drifted out, followed by a severed suit-hand.

There was a long moment of silence as the girls digested the situation. Clearly, my suit was beyond salvage. "However," I said slowly, pointing to another very similar cabinet on the other side of the room, "there's another suit in there. I can't wear it, but a normal unmodified human can."

Michelle spoke up again. "But... But none of us are suit-qualified. We can't go EVA!"

"No," I agreed. "You can't. Especially not under these conditions. Nor could you pilot the pod back once you got there." I turned to face the Dragon. "We'll be docking to the emergency airlock down here; it's not as big as a standard lock, but in a pinch it will work. I've done it before in training." Then I turned to face the rest of the group. "There's someone who *can* both go EVA and pilot a pod, however, up in the saloon. Commodore Tottson is sitting up there right now." Merely thinking about his always calm and cool features made me feel better deep down inside. "He's been in worse spots before."

"He'll be stoned out of his mind," Georgia predicted. "Marvin, you haven't been up there. It's a madhouse!"

"Have you seen him with your own eyes?" I demanded. "This is *Commodore Tottson* that we're talking about here! He's the most resourceful man in space. He probably saw what was happening and rigged up some kind of filter for himself." I suddenly believed in Commodore Tottson like nothing else in the universe, believed in him so deeply that I actually smiled for real. "We're incredibly lucky to have him on board." Next I turned back towards my console and rang up the saloon. "Arnold?" I barked. "Are you still there?"

There was a long silence. I flipped the switch again. "Arnold, can you hear me?"

This time he answered. "Marvin!" he cried out. "Thank God you've called! It's a madhouse up here! An absolute madhouse!"

"What's going on?" I demanded reflexively.

"There's fights going on, men raping men, others masturbating out in front of God and everybody... It's incredible! The waitresses and I have given up on keeping things under control. I'm hiding them under the bar and trying to keep the cattle off of the women. So far I've had to hurt a couple of them pretty badly." The Chief Steward paused. "Marvin, I conked a man in the head a few minutes back with a bottle to keep him off of Miriam. He hasn't moved since, and I'm afraid that I might have killed him. I didn't mean to! Really I didn't!"

Jesus! "All right," I declared. "We're coming up just as soon as we can, Arnold. The cavalry is coming."

"Thank God!" he answered, the relief evident in his voice. "Bring weapons and plenty of restraints."

I clicked my beak, thinking things over. If we were going to evacuate the Henhouse, then eventually we'd have to restore order in the saloon; it was that simple. Whether the Commodore was in a position to help or not, we absolutely would have to have order when it came time to evacuate. Even assuming that Arnold could hold out indefinitely, there just wasn't time to wait for the drugs to wear off. "Right," I agreed. "There's one more thing, Arnold. Have you seen Commodore Tottson lately?"

"Tottson? No, I can't say that I have. He certainly hasn't been trying to get down behind the bar with us, like... *Goddammit, you horny son a bitch! Get your filthy hands off of...*" Then there was a loud cracking sound, and a scream of pain. "Sorry, Marvin" Arnold replied. "I don't exactly have much time to talk here."

"Right," I agreed flatly. "We'll be right up." Then I cut the connection and turned to face my phalanx of loyal Amazons. "I guess you heard," I said slowly.

"We heard," Michelle replied.

"They are ignorant fools!" the Dragon declared angrily. "They endanger us all with their childish games and desires! We *must* get them under control. For their own good!"

"For their own good," I echoed. "Come on, girls. It won't be so bad. Haven't you ever had to deal with a bunch of drunken johns before?"

- VI -

"The thing is that we've got to work together as a team," I said to my girls as we stood just outside the locked Saloon entrance. "The johns are only out for themselves in the state that they're in, and they aren't thinking very clearly."

"They tear each other up as much as anything else," Barbara said, clutching her improvised weapon

convulsively. Barb was a new recruit; we'd just picked her up a few moments before. She'd been fighting off two johns single-handedly for almost the entire time since the accident, and judging by appearances had inflicted a lot more damage than she'd received. Her two assailants were now safely stuffed into mummy bags and secured to the railing two levels down, while their object of desire was now armed with a severed chair leg. "When you look into their eyes, it's like no one's at home. No one at all."

"Right," I agreed, once more trying to sound confident. After all, we were fifteen untrained police officers about to try and quell one of the ugliest riots in the history of space travel while outnumbered more than ten to one. If our confidence failed, we were utterly sunk. I hefted my own chair leg and grinned easily. "Remember how easy it was to round up the rest down below? The johns can't think of anything but sex, sex, sex."

"So this is news?" Michelle murmured. The rest of the girls giggled, and I smiled too.

"All right, ladies" I ordered. "This is it. Are we all ready?"

Heads nodded solemnly.

I fingered my own chair-leg, then gave the order. "Open it, Trixie!"

We burst in screaming like banshees, and I was the first to count coup. Just in front of me a young man in a Lagrange Environmental Controls coverall was slowly and dopily pounding a coworker into submission with his fists. In an instant I was on him, snapping one end of a pair of handcuffs over the wrist of his upraised hand and the other to a light fixture. He seemed more puzzled by what I'd done than angry, and never even tried to fight back.

The next john wasn't nearly so easy. He was a miner, judging by his black uniform, and in the process of raping an unconscious colleague. When I snapped one end of the cuffs onto him he turned angrily on me and ripped the other end of the cuffs out of my grip. I didn't mess around at all; my chair leg impacted his skull with a crack heard round the room, and his eyes glazed over immediately. Then the Dragon darted in from the side and neatly finished the cuffing job.

It wasn't nearly as difficult to secure the saloon as we'd all feared; the johns had already beaten each other to a near-pulp, and with only three or four exceptions most of those still conscious were far too interested in sexual stimulation to break their concentration over something relatively unimportant, such as being stuffed into a bag or chained to a stanchion. We only had enough restraints to safely accommodate perhaps fifty determined individuals, but even this proved to be more than enough. The vast majority were either already unconscious or else had wandered so far from reality that they merely floated docilely wherever we chose to place them. Once we

had successfully raised the siege at the bar, the fight was all but over.

"Where is Commodore Tottson?" I demanded over and over again as I picked my way through the disgusting debris floating everywhere. "Commodore Tottson? Has anyone seen Commodore Tottson?"

"Here," he replied at last, his rich baritone voice unmistakable in the chaos. "Over here!"

"Commodore!" I exclaimed, making my way back through the expensive private chambers that were the prerogative of the rich and famous, like my hero. "Commodore! Thank God! I need your help, sir!"

"Marvin?" he answered. "Marvin, is that you?"

I rounded the last corner, guessed right the first time as to which door to open, and came face to face with Tottson, sitting calmly at his personal table. "Thank God, sir!" I repeated. "Sir, I need you to go EVA for me. We only have one good suit, and--"

"I see," the Commodore replied, interrupting me. "Certainly, I can go EVA for you. But what will you do for me in return?"

My beak dropped open; something was wrong here, terribly, terribly wrong. And somehow, I'd forgotten just how big and strong Tottson was. He'd easily make two of me. Or more.

"You know," the Commodore continued, smiling gently. "I'm not normally attracted to men. Nor am I especially attracted to chickens. But I've sensed something very special about you since the moment we first met." His smile widened. "I think it's the feathers. They make you absolutely irresistible. Did you know that?"

Slowly Tottson reached into his private refrigerator and took out a beer. Expertly he twisted it open, immediately placing his thumb over the opening so the contents could not come gushing out. Then he shook it once, just so, and held the bottle's mouth up to his own, allowing a single pressurized squirt of beer to pass his lips. Clearly, he'd drunk beer in zero-gravity many times before, and knew exactly what he was doing. There were few more experienced free-fall hands to be found anywhere. "Sit down next to me, Marvin" he urged, patting the empty chair. "Sit down nice and close, so that we can talk this EVA business over like real spacemen."

I gulped, suddenly totally lost. "Sir..."

The Commodore's smile widened, and then he reached under the table, producing a very wicked-looking steak knife. There was blood on it, I realized suddenly.

A lot of blood.

Then there was disturbance behind me. "Alexander!" the Dragon cried out in her harshest tones. "What on Earth do you think you're doing, slave?"

The Commodore's eyes went wide. "Mistress!" he said softly. "I didn't mean..."

"I don't care what you meant, you stinking piece of shit!" she shrieked. "Drop that knife, and do it now! Now, now, now, now!"

"Yes, Mistress" the Commodore said softly, releasing the blade. It hung motionless in the air for a moment, and then the Dragon was past me and brandishing it in her own gloved hand.

"You are not to play with knives!" she screamed brutally. "You are not to say or do anything! You are to be quiet, and stay still! You do not deserve to speak or move! You are not worthy of me!"

"Yes, Mistress" Tottson replied, staring placidly down at the floor.

The Dragon glared at me for a long moment, then cocked her head impatiently. "You!" she demanded. "Lock this slithering worm up. Now! He deserves no better!"

I didn't argue for even a second; the effect of the Dragon's whipcord voice was such that I didn't even *consider* arguing. In a trice it was done, and then Georgia was hauling him off to join the rest, whimpering and crying something terrible. "I'm sorry, Mistress!" he blubbered over and over. "So very sorry!"

For a long moment the Dragon and I stood side by side in the little private compartment, staring at the Commodore's bloody knife. "He *did* hold out better than most of them," I whispered. "In a way. I guess."

The Dragon closed her eyes and sighed. "He's as helpless as all the rest," she declared, though in a voice much softer than usual. "Completely helpless and hopeless deep down inside." Then her eyes opened once more, and quite suddenly they were hard and flashing once more. "Now," she demanded. "Now you will cease chasing little-boy-hero dreams and figure out how to save our lives, once and for all!"

- VII -

Real, honest-to-God terror has a very distinctive taste, I learned as I stared into the Dragon's remorseless eyes. It's sort of metallic, laced with bitterness. For a seeming eternity I stood there, beak agape, wanting desperately to gibber and run amok. We were going to die, I knew then with absolute certainty. Tottson couldn't save us, Lagrange couldn't save us, and we certainly couldn't save ourselves. We were all going to die, one by one, and I was going to have to helplessly watch it happen, knowing that somehow it was

all my fault. I looked around the Saloon helplessly, until my eyes fixed on a fifth of gin that was floating just a few feet away. I was immune to the drug powders, yes. But good old alcohol, however...

"What should we be doing?" the Dragon snapped angrily, grabbing a handful of my coveralls and pulling me to her. "We do not have time for this useless woolgathering!"

For a long moment, I could not meet her gaze; the bottle of gin was a far more appealing object of attention. Then I sighed aloud and turned to face her hard, hard eyes. "We've got a real problem," I admitted. "And I'm not sure how to solve it. In fact, I don't think that it *can* be solved."

"Tell me the problem," she rasped. "I will find a solution."

My God, but the Dragon was overweening and arrogant! "It's no big deal," I said after a moment. "Surely a qualified spacer of your education and experience will be able to handle it for me."

Suddenly the hard eyes were inches from my own, narrow and flashing. "Explain the problem to me!" she demanded again. Then the side of my face exploded in pain as she struck me, hard! "Explain!"

"Damn!" I retorted automatically, flinching from the blow. Reflexively my grip tightened on the chair leg that I was still carrying...

...then relaxed under the Dragon's remorseless glare. She was right, of course. I *was* wasting time. "Lagrange has no pods to spare," I said. "They're evacuating the entire station. That's not only never been done before, but no one dreamed that it might ever be necessary. They aren't coming for us. That means our only way out would be for me to go EVA to the *Aphrodite* and take us all out on her. But I don't have a suit anymore. Because I'm a chicken, I can't wear the last normal one. And no beginner stands a chance of even getting aboard *Aphrodite* under these conditions, much less piloting her. Dockings to emergency ports are tricky, even when they're not tumbling. She's very likely damaged, too."

The Dragon frowned mightily. "What if we cut off your beak?" she demanded at last. "Could you fit then?"

I blinked, not even having considered that possibility. My body was fairly close to human shape under the feathers; I was pretty much a cartoon sort of chicken. But... "I'm afraid not. They had to take a casting of my head for the helmet. It's odd-shaped, too."

"We've got a real problem," I admitted. "And I'm not sure how to solve it. In fact, I don't think that it can be solved."

"What foolishness!" the dominatrix muttered, her frown intensifying further. Then her eyes snapped back to meet mine. "The spare suit," she demanded. "It is in good condition?"

I shrugged. "It should be. I inspected it last week, and there's no damage to the cabinet."

The Dragon nodded in satisfaction. "Excellent. Meet me in the Control Room in ten minutes. Have the spare suit ready." Then she spun gracefully in mid air and flashed away.

The Dragon arrived two minutes ahead of schedule, I noted, with several of her fellow artists in tow and carrying a bright pink package carelessly under one arm. "The suit," she demanded. "You will show it to me."

I nodded and lifted it up out of its protective case for her to see. "It's a standard Mark Twenty-Five," I explained. "You people may think of Beauregard as being cheap, but in point of fact he believes in buying good stuff for us where it really counts." I spread the suit out a little so that everyone could see. "The bottom part is just airtight elastic fabric," I explained. "There's boots to wear over it, though they won't fit my feet anymore. The stuff is slightly porous to water and very highly reflective; the wearer is cooled by his own perspiration." I paused and looked around, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. Each and every one of the girls was listening as though their lives hung upon every word. "It's not intended that the wearer of this style of suit be exposed to prolonged periods of sunlight," I continued. "It's presumed that a user will be intelligent enough to mostly stay in the shadows, or else use a sunshade. Otherwise he'll overheat. The tradeoff, however, is that the flexibility and dexterity are almost unlimited."

The Dragon nodded soberly. "And the helmet?" she asked.

"The air fitting is connected to the helmet," I explained, pointing. "On a station like this, EVA's are so rare that expended gasses are not a problem; when the user exhales, the suit just vents the gas to space. That keeps things nice and simple. We also run a much purer mix of oxygen than standard breathing-air at reduced air pressure, to reduce strain on the suit."

"Yes," the Dragon agreed, fingering the connection and examining it critically. "This is all very simple indeed. I have long suspected that there was nothing truly complex about space." Then she faced me once more. "So the lower portion is merely an airtight body-suit that allows for perspiration. Must you be able to sweat through the suit?"

"Not for a short hop, no. But I imagine that I'd be getting mighty warm by the time that I hit *Aphrodite* without any cooling at all."

"Even if you made very careful use of shade?"

I thought about it. "I'd have to make and use a parasol. Even then, I'd be mighty warm."

She nodded. "I understand. And you absolutely cannot wear the helmet?"

"Even if you removed my beak, my head is too long and narrow." I demonstrated, then sighed. "I'll have to admit, that was a very good idea, cutting off the beak. Too bad it won't work."

The Dragon frowned. "It was a stupid, pitiful idea, if it will not work. A waste of time." Her black-gloved fingers moved delicately over the helmet, tracing various contours. "And you cannot wear the suit's bottom, either?"

"No," I explained, shaking my head sadly. "The suit can only be made with just so much stretch in it, or else it will puff up like a balloon and immobilize the wearer in vacuum. I'm still human-shaped, but not *that* human shaped."

"I see." Then the Dragon removed the pink package from under her arm and thrust it towards me. "Put this on!" she commanded.

My reflexes were plenty good; I snagged the projectile cleanly before it could knock me in the chest. It was some kind of rubber suit, I could see...

...one with little rubber knobs on the inside at strategically located places, and oversized rubber breasts affixed to the chest. "Hey!" I cried in outrage. "This is..."

"Put it on," the Dragon commanded. "We are not here to play games!" Then she turned to Jeanine. "He will require much powdering. He was correct when he said that his shape is no longer quite human."

"Gotcha," Jeanine replied, producing a bottle of talcum. Then she smiled at me. "Come on over here by the air inlet, hon. We don't want to be breathing any more of this stuff than we can help."

"Hey!" I cried out again, this time louder. "This is a goddamn sex suit! And a girl-type one at that! This is for guys who like to pretend to be women; I'm not into that kind of crap!"

Jeanine laid her hand on my shoulder. "Please, Marvin!" she explained. "We need for you to do this!"

"It will be airtight," the Dragon declared flatly. "It does not leak a drop; I have proven this many times."

"And the girl one is closer to your size than the boy one," Trixie added, her big rabbit eyes appearing very solemn. "With your tail-feathers, we think that it may be more comfortable for you."

Still smiling, Jeanine reached out and touched my shoulder. I slapped her hand away. "How about the helmet?" I demanded. "How am I going to get air?"

The Dragon's eyes flashed dangerously, but Jeanine silenced her with a glance. Then she was smiling at me once more. She was very, very pretty, I realized suddenly. "One thing at a time, Marvin" she

explained in a reasonable tone. "One thing at a time. How can we decide how to hook up the plumbing until we see what you look like with it on?"

The girls were all looking at me expectantly then, and the Dragon was fingering the handle of her whip. So I blushed, then removed my pants and began changing.

It was terrible, climbing into that girl-suit. Jeanine powdered and powdered, but I was still half-plucked by the time that I was totally wrapped up inside. The mouth had a sort of bit-thingie built into it; I didn't want to put that part on, but Jeanine pointed out that cutting the rubber unnecessarily might not exactly be a good idea. In fact, she pointed out, cutting the suit was probably an even worse idea than leaving me mute. After all, once I was out the lock no one would be able to hear me anyway.

"Whew!" Patrice exclaimed, once it was done. "For a while there, I didn't think that we were going to make it."

"It's very tight," Jeanine agreed as I stood and listened, unable to say a word. Very much against my will, the little rubber knobs were beginning to have their way with me, and I feared that I was about to become aroused in a very public way. The talc was tickling my nose too, and I sneezed explosively.

"Poor dear!" Barbara exclaimed. "Trixie, run and get a tissue!"

"We need to get his air hooked up as soon as we can," Marilyn agreed. She turned to the Dragon. "Have you something in mind?"

She nodded coldly and produced a large black hood that appeared to be made of rubber. "He will wear this on top," she declared, "and we shall seal it to his neck with liquid latex. This hood is cut very large, for a special slave that cannot wear ordinary headgear. We will glue the air fittings to the back, and fix lenses in the eyeholes. Then we shall strap the bottles to his back and tape him up tightly so that the suit cannot balloon out any more than can be avoided." For the first time ever in my experience, she smiled prettily and dimpled. "It *will* work."

The taping seemed to take forever, even though several of the girls were very accomplished at it. Poor Trixie fumbled a little at one point, and the Dragon snatched the roll of tape right out of her hands. "You blithering idiot!" she had snapped. "Haven't you ever taped a man up into a sex suit before?" Other than that one incident, however, things had gone pretty smoothly. Jeanine had been prescient enough to tape up my feet triple-thick so as to minimize the chance of a leak, and the Dragon herself had taped my hands very carefully and with great attention to detail, so that they remained fairly flexible.

Meanwhile Patrice had produced what looked like a fairly workable space helmet. I watched her as

she tested the fittings with a few drops of shampoo, and nodded vigorously at the results. One of the connections released a tiny string of bubbles, but the leak was on the exhaust side anyhow. It wouldn't really matter; in fact, I'd worn several commercial suits whose plumbing leaked considerably more. Patrice had slathered on another layer of fixative anyway, and then reinforced the connections with yet more tape. Then she anchored the hose so that it wouldn't flop around and work loose. When I finally tried the hood on, there was just enough slack to allow me to turn my head slightly.

"He won't be able to move his head much anyway," the Dragon observed with a rare nod of approval. "Not once we seal his neck."

That was the worst job of all, as expected. As I began consuming my forty-five minute supply of canned air, the girls went wild with tape and latex, then employed a hair-dryer to set everything up. Once more Jeanine got out her shampoo bottle and tested for leaks. "I've got a few bubbles in the back," Patrice observed. More tape and latex followed, and then the improvised suit passed its retest. The Dragon produced two mismatched flashlights from somewhere, and they were turned on and then taped to the top of my head, pointing roughly in the direction I was facing.

Marie had been made responsible for putting together an improvised EVA kit for me; there was supposed to be one just outside the airlock hatch, but after the blow we'd taken I could no longer count on its being there. Once I was certified airtight she placed a spare roll of tape in my toolbox, strapped it onto the tank harness that had been salvaged from the main suit, and chained everything into place with four or five pairs of handcuffs. Then she draped a coil of black silk rope over my shoulder, settling it in between my still-impressive false breasts. "I think he's ready," she declared.

"I think so too," the Dragon agreed. "Any last-minute ideas?"

I looked around the Control Room, thinking rapidly. One tool that I was certain would come in handy outside was a gaff, a long pole-like gadget with a hook on one end. What could I use for a gaff? Finally my eyes settled on the Dragon's whip. It would not be perfect for the job, I decided, but it might help some. Very slowly and carefully I reached out and removed it from her belt. For an instant her face hardened and I thought that she was going to slap my hand away, then she nodded and handed it over. "Very well," she said resignedly. "I accept the need."

Carefully I coiled the whip and shoved it under the handcuffs, where it would be available for immediate use. Then, there being no way for me to communicate effectively anyway, I stepped into the airlock, took a

grip on the railing, and cycled it before my courage could fail me.

The suit stiffened up immediately as the friendly air around me bled away to the terrible nothingness of space, making little popping and stretching noises all the while. Normal suits didn't make a sound when exposed to vacuum, and my heart did flip-flops at every tiny reminder of just exactly how utterly insane this little stunt truly was. I remained in the lock for about a full minute, I judged, waiting to see if my suit would explode the way that I expected it to at any second. It didn't, however, and in time I grew confident enough to open the outer door.

The area outside the hatchway on my left was indeed an utter wreck, as expected. The EVA kits were missing, and a large area of hull was scorched and battered. Out in the middle of this scorched and battered area three luridly colored phalluses extended, marking the location of our earlier repair job. The shafts appeared more ludicrous than obscene from this side of the pressure hull, extending stiffly out into space as if terribly aroused by all the damage. Carefully I flexed all my joints, first very slightly and then as far as I dared. Again the suit held, much to my surprise, though my motions were more limited than I would have liked. This was especially true of my head.

Because the Henhouse was tumbling, the airlock's exit was definitely "down", though the acceleration was very slight. However, that direction was always "down" due to the station's normal spin, and the handgrips had been set up accordingly. Using great care, I let my hands slide down the railing until I was at the bottom, and dangling with only my heavily taped feet between deep space and me.

It was at this point that I really began to sweat, literally as well as figuratively. Normally EVA's are never done without another qualified spacer ready and standing by to help. Even more, they are never done without employing either some kind of jetpack or else extensive safety ropes utilizing specially designed clips and fittings. I had neither available to me; the EVA harness had been stored with the other gear in the now-missing locker, and the Henhouse had never generated enough EVA's to justify the expense of a jetpack.

I hadn't bothered to tell the ladies about this part, there being no need for them to worry about something they could do absolutely nothing about.

I did, however, have available to me a length of black silk rope and a whip; for a moment I stood out in the sunlight and considered how best to employ them. It would be easy enough, I judged, to tie myself to an anchor point, travel the length of the rope, tie it again, and then go back and release my first

knot. It would be safe enough, as well, considering the circumstances. The process would take far too long, however, given how far I had to travel and how much air I probably had left. So, clicking my beak in concentration, I decided to break those last few remaining rules that I'd left intact, and freehand my way across the Henhouse without a safety line.

It wasn't so hard at first. The phalluses provided my first handholds, and I swung past them easily and onto the Henhouse's main endbrace. This was an I-beam that ran conveniently along my path towards the Solar Farm, and I used its bottom ledges as a highway for my hands.

By the time I reached the beam's end, I knew that we'd failed to foresee a serious problem. My eyelenses were fogging up! Underneath all of the rubber and tape, I was sweating profusely in my non-reflective suit. It was far worse than I'd imagined that it would be. The black hood I was wearing served as a virtual magnet for solar radiation. My whole head was beginning to ache with the heat, and I knew that I didn't have long at all to improvise some kind of shade for myself.

The Solar Farm was my best hope for doing exactly that. The Farm was typical of all such installations, the place where we grew new solar cells out of silicon and the like. One of my regular jobs was to harvest the new cells every so often, when a new crop was ripe, and convey them to Lagrange for sale as a small secondary source of income. Therefore, I knew the farm area well, though I usually approached from another angle.

It was just as well; by the time I got to the Farm I was virtually blind, and even under the fogging my eyes were red and burning from the perspiration that was continually getting into them. Any sane EVA would have ended long since; poor visibility is more than enough excuse for an abort. I didn't have that option, however, and when my fingertips finally reached the end of the beam I hung there in the microgravity for just a moment and tried to think things through. The cells grew on long stems, I knew, stems that could serve as parasol handles in a pinch. But by



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now I was totally blind, and thrash around though I might, I couldn't feel anything except smooth, featureless hull anywhere around me. Carefully I closed my stinging eyes and concentrated; the farm had to be just ahead of me on my right, I knew. It simply had to be!

There wasn't anything else to do. If I stayed where I was, I would die. If I went back, we would all die. If I jumped and took my best guess at where I was going, we all might live.

So I pulled myself up onto the beam and jumped.

My long chicken-toes felt very awkward and confined in their human-shaped prison; I could not even have walked in normal gravity. Despite the discomfort I lined myself up as best I could, and gently shoved myself away from the I-beam in what I knew simply *must* be the right direction. Then I extended my arms and legs fully, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It was growing very warm indeed inside my hot-pink double-breasted space suit, I realized dully as time passed and passed and passed without my encountering anything. At least I'd probably be unconscious with heat stroke before I ran out of air, as near as I could figure it. Then I could drift eternally in free orbit, a real prize for anyone who found me dressed as I was. It would be a fitting enough end for the Pussy Pilot, I told myself as eon after endless eon crept by. "Look over here, Elmer! Lookie here at what I found! You ain't gonna *believe* this shit!"

Then, long after I'd given up, something brushed up against my left fingertips. Instantly I was in action, rolling hard in that direction and flailing, flailing, flailing...

...yet encountering nothing once more.

My breath was coming in sobs, I suddenly realized, and I was so frightened that I was about to foul myself. I was panicked, utterly panicked, and nothing kills in space more efficiently than panic. Quite deliberately I froze in position and took several long, deep breaths of good, fresh air. Then, I tried to look at my position rationally.

I had not merely imagined feeling something solid, I knew for certain. Or at least it was safe to assume that I hadn't, since if I were that far-gone I was dead anyway. Therefore, I was probably floating very near the Henhouse, most likely just where I expected to be, near the Solar Farm. The Dragon's whip was still exactly where I'd stashed it; moving slowly and deliberately despite the ever-increasing heat I brandished it to explore the area around me.

On one toss, I distinctly felt the whipcord strike something.

I ran the whip through my fingers until I located its wickedly thin end. Then I gripped it firmly and whirled the handle about my head, bolo-style.

Clumsily I released the handle at just about the point where I imagined that the Henhouse was...

...missing cleanly.

Once more I whirled the handle and released it; this time, however, I was rewarded. Though I thought that I'd missed once more, when I tried to pull the handle in I came up short. Though the resulting jerk nearly yanked the whip out of my hands, I managed to hold on, slowly drifting towards my goal.

Eventually I hit and hit hard, bruising my head through the soft improvised helmet. It was worth it, though, for just before I struck the hull everything went black. I'd found shade!

Once more I scrabbled around me with all four limbs, trying to figure out exactly where I was. My left foot encountered a tall, narrow sort of pole, which felt to me just like the stem of a growing solar cell. Moving very carefully in the dark, I turned end-for-end and explored the object with my hands. Yes, I decided, it simply had to be a cell. I reached into my tool kit and pulled out the pliers, then used them to strike a carefully judged blow to the stem's base. It broke free, and I knew that at last I had my umbrella.

Because of the fact that spacewalks were so routine in the Farm, there were plenty of handholds scattered conveniently about. Though I was still a bit disoriented, the cells grew in perfect rows and I was able to follow them easily enough. Eventually I came to the end of the Farm, which unless I was a full hundred and eighty degrees off in my estimates placed me just outside the girls' living quarters. Here I stopped to think things through.

I was blind, totally and completely blind. Even worse, though I was finally out of the sun I was still far, far too hot. It takes considerable time for heat to radiate away in the vacuum of space, and time was something that I didn't have very much of. If I didn't find a way to cool off, and soon, then I would die before finishing my work. It was as simple as that.

But how?

My mind spun idly as I hung there in space and sweated, sweated, sweated. I'd have been dead long since, I realized dully, if I hadn't been made over into a chicken. The docs always improved the patient's body as much as possible as a matter of routine when extensive transmutation was undertaken, and I was no exception. I had better than perfect eyesight and hearing, the speed and stamina of an Olympian, and the constitution of an ox. Right at the moment, for the very first time, it was well worth having the constitution of an ox in exchange for the appearance of a chicken. Still, I had to cool myself down, and soon. A standard spacesuit, I knew, accomplished this by evaporation. Was there any way that I could gain access to liquids from this side of the hull?

Hmm. Not that I could think of.

But gasses were fluids too, weren't they? And they could cool too....

Carefully I reached into my tool kit and pulled out a screwdriver. I didn't like what I was about to do, didn't like it at all. It was dangerous as hell, for me as well as for anyone who might be on the other side of the hull. But what choice did I have? I was *hot*, and I craved a cooldown like a drug addict craves his fix.

First, I took a moment to tie myself to the nearest handhold. Then I grasped the screwdriver firmly...

...and drove it right through the thin hullmetal!

A jet of air rushed out immediately, and I placed myself directly in front of it so as to get the maximum effect. The cold, expanding air felt wonderful, even through the layers of tape and rubber between it and me. It reminded me a garden hose on a hot summer afternoon back on Earth, or of an ice pack pressed into my belly. All too soon the airflow shut off as the room beyond was emptied and the automatic hatches sealed off the hull breach, so again and then a third time I crawled across the hull and created new leaks, feeling a little better each time. It was damned expensive air-conditioning, yes. But it was air conditioning all the same, and that was what mattered.

I was still pretty hot after wasting three suites worth of air, though not nearly so bad as I'd been. More important, however, my head was now clearer, and I was shaded under a parasol. I was free to begin dealing with what I feared was by far the more difficult of my two problems. My helmet lenses were still badly fogged up. I was as blind as a bat. And I couldn't possibly jump out to *Aphrodite* if I couldn't see her.

In a real suit, I knew, the air outlets inside the helmet were arranged in such a manner that cool, dry tank air played continually over the visor; this was what kept things clear. I hadn't remembered this in time, however, and now I was paying the price. Patrice had taken advantage of the long, narrow shape of my head to route the plumbing off to my left, and the air was now blowing down my neck.

So that was the problem, sure enough. I'd done my troubleshooting, yes indeed I had, and the very next time that I cobbled myself together a space suit out of sex toys and bondage gear I was quite sure that I'd get it right. But that didn't help me here and now, not at all. You couldn't exactly wipe off the inside of your visor, not in a pressure suit.

But I had to be able to *see*!

It was my air-jet cooling expedient that finally offered me a solution, though it was rather a desperate one. I was hardly the first person ever to foul the inside of a suit visor; space-sickness was the most common cause of this. One of the advantages of having a direct-exhaust type ventilation system was that the user could in theory dump the majority of the air in his suit in a hurry to clear it out, and then refill it

out of his tanks and thus provide himself with a clean atmosphere. If I were to do this, I reasoned, it would probably clear my lenses and cool me down even further. Almost certainly it would, in fact, and had I been wearing a standard suit I'd have performed the drill in a heartbeat.

Rapidly depressurizing and then repressurizing a plastic sex suit while alone and far from an airlock, however, was something else entirely, no matter how sold the Dragon was on the toughness and integrity of the materials involved. Still, after a few moments of careful consideration, I didn't see where I had much of a choice.

Reluctantly, I reached into my toolbox for the spare roll of tape, then suppressed a momentary stab of panic when I didn't find it right under my fingertips. Had it drifted away when I'd pulled out the pliers or screwdriver? Then I located the familiar round shape, and pressed it against the hull where I could locate it easily at need. Then, I hyperventilated for a few breaths, opened my beak wide, and activated my spill valve.

I'd done this before in training, but somehow it just wasn't the same. My suit went flaccid, the air roared, ice picks sank into my ears, my feathers felt like they were being ripped from their roots...

...and suddenly my lenses were clear; I could see the hull! And the roll of tape, clear as day!

I twisted my wrist savagely in the opposite direction, and the roaring lessened though the ice-picks pain continued, savage and brutal. Then all was still again

Except for an ominous hissing, coming from I knew not where.

Instantly my training kicked in, and heedless of further suit-damage I twisted and writhed, trying to spot the little plume of air that would mark my leak. It was nowhere to be found, however, nowhere! Which meant that it was located either on my back or my helmet, if my instructors were to be believed. If it was my back, I was dead; there was no way that a suited man could patch his own back. If it were my helmet, however...

Carefully I felt around my head, and detected almost at once where the problem was coming from. It was right where I'd hit my head earlier! Apparently I'd scuffed the plastic almost through, and now it had failed. I tore off some tape, prayed that it would work in vacuum...

...and sighed in relief as it took hold immediately. It was good tape, I told myself as I applied layer after layer, very good tape indeed. Trust bondage types to be real connoisseurs.

Reflexively my eyes sought the air gauge at the bottom of my visor, as was standard procedure after a suit rupture or any other incidence of significant air loss. It wasn't there, of course, and I began to feel very

apprehensive about my air supply. There wasn't anything I could do, however, short of tearing the tanks off of my back and looking at the gauges. So I decided that it simply didn't matter how much air I had left. I would either finish my job, or else I would not. It was as simple as that.

Navigating was far easier with my eyes functional, and the improvised parasol worked very well indeed. Effortlessly I drifted from handhold to handhold up towards the center of what remained of the Henhouse, where the axis of rotation was located. We were spinning two ways, I determined as I drifted along. First, we were wheeling end over end rapidly enough to produce a noticeable acceleration at either end of the station. We were also pivoting slowly around our long axis, as well, though not quickly enough to really matter; I estimated that we were making perhaps three or four revolutions an hour. I was going to have to jump across open space to *Aphrodite*, and therefore it was essential that I move to the station's axis before making my leap. The pod was going to be a difficult enough target without adding any more vectors into the equation than was needful. All the while my eyes continually sought out the reassuring sight of my hot-pink vessel nearly motionless against the stars. She still wasn't too far away, I judged, maybe a klick or two.

Only four or five times as far as an experienced spaceman might reasonably attempt to jump under ideal conditions, with help standing by.

Well, at least *Aphrodite* was a big target.

Once I got to the axis, I took a moment to think things through one last time. Was there anything that I could do to maximize my chances? Had I ever learned anything about jumping other than aiming and taking my best shot? No, I decided reluctantly. All that I could do was take reasonable care, and trust to luck.

Very carefully, I sought the best, firmest footing I could find, making certain that one foot would have exactly as good a grip as the other. Then I closed my eyes and tried to picture myself in the suit, trying to determine where my center of gravity might be. There were the breasts to consider, as well as the toolbox and the length of chain; fortunately, I was already used to the tanks from training and would account for them naturally. Next I re-opened my eyes and fixed them not just on *Aphrodite*, but on the huge chicken logo painted onto her side. The hen wore lip-

stick, I noted; the painted lips became my bullseye. Slowly I closed my eyes again, picturing myself landing right up against those lips over and over again, smack, smack, smack. I bent my legs, then used the leverage of a convenient handhold to press myself firmly against the hull. Next I lined my parasol up against the target, exposing myself to the sun for a moment, but also lining the umbrella up with my center of gravity. I couldn't see my target through the immature solar cell, but that no longer mattered. I knew *exactly* where those lovely lips were.

Then I pressed my feet against the hull, hard, and launched myself into space.

- VIII -

For a very long time, I thought that I was actually going to make it. The *Aphrodite* grew steadily larger and larger, and squint though I might I could not detect any bearing shift. It looked as if I was dead on course. Then as I drew closer, I watched first one and then a second star eclipse itself behind my pod's hull. There *was* cross-drift, even though it was not enough to be readily detectable, and I *was* going to miss.

Unless I did something about it.

But what? There was very little that I could throw away. I was reluctant to part with my tools until I was safe inside the pod, and the same went for the whip and the rope. They had proven themselves extremely useful so far, and I had no reason whatsoever to believe that things were going to be any better on the outside of the pod. Nor could I spare the parasol, unless I wanted to roast once more and fog up my lenses again. In training I'd been taught that boots were always good for reaction mass in situations like this, but I was wearing none. That left exactly one option, an alternative I did not like at all.

The air tank.

In an ordinary suit, I could at any given moment check to see how much air I had remaining, down almost to a single lungful. Spacewalkers tend to be obsessive about this sort of thing, and for this reason the instruments are perhaps even more redundant and refined than is needful. A mere glance would inform me how much air I had remaining by almost any conceivable measure; time remaining, pressure, volume, you name it. In this cobbled-up nightmare I could only guess, however. I wasn't even carrying a chronometer; that was built into the helmet too!

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The improvised suit had held up so well that I wasn't particularly worried about leaks any more, or more likely I had ceased to find such worrying to be productive. There were plenty of other dangers clamoring for my immediate attention, however, and air was first and foremost among them. In truth I had no idea how much breathing time I had left, and I wasn't particularly eager to waste any as propellant.

On the other hand, I didn't particularly care to drift away into free orbit, either. And I could probably maneuver with an air jet better than via throwing tools; I could place the air jet at something resembling my center of mass, whereas throwing things would naturally put me into a far more rapid spin than that which I was already experiencing.

For a long minute or two I thought things over, watching two more stars slide behind *Aphrodite*, and another emerge from the far side. My cross-drift was eyeball-apparent now, and I was perhaps half a click out.

I tried to think things through one last time. Unless I missed my guess, things would soon be happening very fast and this would be the last opportunity I had to really work things out. The further out I made my corrections, the less gas I would use in making them. On the other hand, the earlier I disconnected my tank, the longer I would have to survive on just what air was in the suit. There was a wild card in the deck as well. How much air exactly did I still have? In truth, I knew, any breath could be my last; I'd been through far too much already to even be able to pretend to know how much time had elapsed since the girls had sealed me into my slave hood-cum-helmet.

In the end, I decided that I simply had to have more information. There was a direct pressure gauge on the air bottle, I knew, though I had to dismount the thing totally in order to read it. Carefully I shrugged myself out of the standard harness and twisted myself around with a kick and spin. Sure enough, the bottle's gauge was working perfectly. In fact, I tapped it several times with my fingertip in order to make absolutely certain.

It read dead empty.

Suddenly I was breathing hard again, and it took a major act of will to calm myself down. There was still air in the bottle, I told myself, there had to be. I'd just been breathing out of it a moment before, after all. It might be very low, but there *was* still pressure.

The tank's nozzle was bent ninety-degrees away from the device's long axis in order to make the thing easier to hook up to standard suit hardware. Most of the time this was a welcome engineering feature, but just now it was major headache. It would not be possible to simply aim and point the tank like a reaction pistol; instead I would once more have to guesstimate my center of mass and try to line things up on it.

My first attempt was a terrible hash; the air jet was plenty powerful, but I had it aligned wrong and the thrust mostly served to whip me into a spin. I was just barely able to retain control of the tank, and if I'd not tied the parasol to my leg I'd have lost it entirely. There wasn't anything to do but waste a second spurt of gas in an effort to cancel out the damage of the first, and finally I did just exactly that. When I was finished, I was stable, all right.

And the *Aphrodite* was sliding off to one side faster than ever!

Finally I lined things up one last time—I didn't think that the bottle would give me more than one final spurt, judging by how quickly it was fading away. Carefully I cradled the bottle in my arms and lined up the spout just below and to the right of my breastbone, and waited, waited, waited until I spun into just the right position.

Then I cracked the valve, and left it open until the air was utterly spent.

Naturally I could not see where I was going, since I had to face away in order to point the jet in the right direction. When I spun around again, however, my pod loomed huge in front of me...

...and was clearly going to slide past just out of reach!

Reflexively I shoved the empty tank away from me just as hard as I possibly could, and then sent the parasol after; I would run out of air now long before I had time to cook. It was still not enough, however, and the ship was almost by! It was by in fact; I was passing the nose now, just out of reach of the tangled wreckage that had once been the Henhouse's docking station! I was gone, gone, gone...

...until I felt hard eyes glaring at me from behind a black leather hood not unlike the one I was now wearing. "You insignificant little worm!" a cold voice screamed in rage. "You've failed us all. You've failed at everything you've ever touched, and betrayed everything you've ever hoped to be. You deserve to float around forever in a pink sexsuit, you piece of filth! You deserve it!"

"No!" I screamed aloud. "No! I can't fail!"

Then suddenly I was grasping the Dragon's whip in my right hand, spinning it bolo-fashion. I had one chance, maybe, as my ship floated away. One chance, if I moved quickly and didn't bother too much about aiming. At the very last second I released the whip-handle...

...and then felt the most welcome tug in the world as it lodged firmly in the wreckage and caught, jerking me to a sudden halt.

For just one second I luxuriated in my victory, breathing in and out, in and out. Then, moving slowly so as not to dislodge my precarious toehold despite the fact that my air was beginning to grow noticeably stale, I made my way hand-over-hand down to the

wrecked docking area and looked around to see what was wrong. I'd originally planned to enter *Aphrodite* through the EVA airlock, but I'd never have time to travel that far now. My lenses were rapidly fogging over again on top of everything else; soon I'd be blind once more. I'd either find a way in through the docking ring, or I'd die trying. It seemed to be the day for that sort of thing.

Everything was an absolute wreck, everything! At first I couldn't even recognize much of what I was looking at, but then once I realized that not everything that I was seeing was part of the Henhouse things began to make sense. Part of Lagrange itself had hit and lodged here, I could see, including a taxi and its most unfortunate occupants. There was a severed human arm floating free in front of the airlock proper; I snatched it out of the way and tossed it unceremoniously over my shoulder. There simply wasn't time for delicacy! The main docking dogs had separated themselves, I could see, but the ring itself was still holding everything together. There was a hand wheel for that, and I fell upon it desperately. Carefully I anchored myself against a shock-warped support beam and tugged on it with all of my might.

It would not budge. Not a millimeter!

Angrily, desperately, I tried again until I saw spots before my eyes. Still it would not give, and now there was another hissing noise in my ears; I'd sprung another leak! It didn't matter I decided; the air in my suit wasn't much good for anything anyway.

A third time I wrenched at the wheel, and still it would not give. My hands ached, and this time the little spots simply would not go away. I had one last chance, I decided, one last good effort in me, and then that would be that.

Without thinking I slid my hand into my toolbox, hoping for inspiration. Inside, I felt the pair of locking pliers and something long, hard and heavy. Whatever it was, I decided, it would make a great hammer! I pulled it out and, working by feel now with my lenses fully fogged up, beat a few times on the wheel's spokes.

Nothing.

Damnit, this was getting serious! I couldn't see at all now, and I was running out of options! Angrily I reached into the toolbox one last time and retrieved the pliers, then clamped its jaws onto the wheel, offering me a place to hammer where I could get a clear swing. Then I reached back and swung with all of my might, slamming my improvised hammer with considerable force onto the innocent, inoffensive pliers.

And the wheel spun a little; I could feel it give!

Panting hard now, I swung my hammer again and again, missing sometimes but often driving the wheel around just a little more. After several such impacts, the wheel finally spun free. I dropped my tool and gripped the wheel firmly with both hands, moving the heavy gears faster than they'd ever intended to be driven. Finally the wheel quit resisting altogether, and, hooking my toes under the docking hatch itself,



Illustration by Aura Maser

I pushed just as hard as I could against the twisted remains of the Henhouse and ejected them slowly off into space. *Aphrodite* was free, free, free! And I could now enter my pod, where, if there was any justice in the universe, there would be real air for me to breathe instead of the used-up vacuumy stuff that I was now existing on.

There was one last wheel to turn before the airlock door opened, and I had to find my hammer one last time and beat on it as well before it freed itself up enough to let me in. I dragged myself inside with the very last of my strength, and hit the cycle button after not too terribly much fumbling around. Then I heard the air rushing in, and knew that I would live after all.

Something was very wrong, however. The air was rushing in, yes. But I still could not breathe! Good Lord, what could be wrong now?

It was the suit, I realized in my darkening mind, the suit! I was still trapped in my little bubble of bad air, even though I was now surrounded by sweet, sweet oxygen. And the lenses were still fogged over too; I could not see a thing! Here I was, surrounded by good air and fully-functional equipment, and I was still about to die!

Blindly I fumbled around for my tool kit; there had been a utility knife in there, I knew that there had been! But where? I'd lost it, and now I was going to die for it! Finally my groping hands encountered the hammer that I'd used to batter my way inside, and without really thinking—I was long past that—I used it to smash open the lenses over my eyes. Wondrous clean air flowed over my face, and for a long, long time I simply floated in the airlock and breathed, breathed, breathed. The hammer had saved my life three times, I thought to myself as I rested and recovered for a little while, three times in perhaps three minutes. I'd keep it forever, I swore, and hang it up in my cockpit as a lucky charm that would protect me from harm forevermore. It might not be logical, but whenever it was with me, I knew, I'd somehow feel safe.

Finally the nausea faded from my stomach, and I began to feel a little better. My eyes opened, and I was able to see clearly. There were no dark spots, and no foggy lenses to block my view of the world. *Aphrodite* seemed to be in perfectly ordinary condition; her blowers were humming smoothly and the "inner lock door open" was the only red light in sight. I'd forgotten what it was like, not to be confronted by seas of blinking red lights, or so it seemed.

Then my fingers sought out the hammer that I'd used to save myself, so I could put it away in a safe place before rescuing the others aboard the Henhouse and then adding *Aphrodite's* considerable capacity to the efforts at Lagrange. My digits encountered its reassuring smoothness almost immediately and, still

a bit dopey, I raised it up to my eyes to gaze upon it for the very first time.

My hammer, the lucky tool that had saved my life, was a dildo. The most obscenely swollen chrome-plated dildo that I'd ever encountered in my life, in fact, complete with a now-ruined heavy-duty vibrator motor.

- IX -

EIGHT MONTHS LATER...

"...some people may call it a miracle," Commodore Tottson's deep voice was saying, "but we spacemen know better. Saving Lagrange Station didn't take a miracle; it just took the coordinated work of dozens of skilled and courageous spacers, all working together towards a common goal with ingenuity and inspiration."

I nodded silently from my seat. Not just one Sector had remained habitable at the height of the Emergency, despite the gloomiest of projections, but two. The evacuation had been called off during my first refugee run, just after I'd dropped off the Henhouse contingent at an emergency shack. Keeping two sectors habitable after such a catastrophe had not only been an incredible feat of improvisation, but had also saved thousands of lives. The death toll had proven to be unexpectedly low, though hundreds instead of thousands dead was still bad enough.

"Their efforts," Commodore Tottson continued, "were most laudable, and should be remembered with respect forever. However, there is one story of improvisation, leadership, and courage that outshines them all."

Suddenly I felt hundreds of eyes and not a few video cameras focusing on me, and I blushed under my feathers. The missing ones had still not completely grown back in, and I was therefore a bit ragged looking. No one seemed to care, however.

"We've all heard the story of Marvin Mackleschmidt. We've heard of how he managed to restore critical systems utilizing the unlikeliest of materials, how he quelled a riot and then, most of all, how he crossed open space under conditions that make me shudder just to think about them. Not a single fatality occurred aboard the Henhouse during the Emergency, due more to Brother Mackleschmidt's skill and professionalism than any other single factor. He not only saved the lives of the men and women entrusted to his professional care after they had been written off by far more experienced spacehands, but managed to actively aid in the rescue of others before all was said and done.

"At first, the Brotherhood of Command Navigators refused to accept Brother Marvin's report, because it seemed so wildly unlikely. I was there, however, and

my own life was one of those that Marvin saved. I took a personal interest in learning what had gone wrong, in detail. And, to my astonishment, I was able to determine that Marvin's incredible report was factual in every detail. Subsequently, a formal Brotherhood inquiry was forced rather against their will to the same conclusion. Brother Mackleschmidt was not and is not a liar. Instead, he is a true hero."

I shifted nervously in my seat. The Brotherhood's first official reaction to my report had been to pull my license for blatant falsifications; only Tottson's personal investigation had saved me. That, and the fact that I'd not taken the time to remove more than the head of my improvised pressure suit while piloting the refugees. People will tend to talk, when their rescue pilot is seen wearing a taped-over pink plastic sex suit with nipples proudly erect and clutching a chrome-plated dildo.

It had been very kind of Tottson to stand up for me, I knew, even if we Henhouse staffers *had* saved his life. The Commodore had experienced a very bad week after the incident, between blaming himself for bringing in the Blueberries and then ending up among the rioters instead of the good guys. It hadn't been his fault, none of it! The whole thing had been a refining accident, that was all. Still, he'd blamed himself and had been unable to leave his stateroom for days.

It was just as well that he couldn't remember a thing about our encounter in the Saloon. And I certainly had no intention of ever reminding him. Tottson was a damned fine spacer, and a damned fine man. Even if he did tend to spend a good part of his R and R time in the company of the Dragon.

I smiled as I thought of her, then turned and sought out her face among the crowd. All the Henhouse people were sitting together off in a corner by themselves, Beauregard in the front row, though it hadn't been planned that way. Even now, after all that we had been through, no one would sit next to anyone associated with the Henhouse. It was rather sad, really.

The Dragon herself was also sitting in the front row, dressed in racy black lace and spike-heel boots that were subdued and tasteful in contrast to her normal working wardrobe, but which still stood out dramatically from the more conventional attire around her. The Henhouse was back in business already, though on a far more limited basis, and the Dragon had resumed her usual habits. She almost never left her Dungeon, and a visit to Lagrange proper was virtually unheard of. I was being deeply honored.

She was the real hero of the Henhouse. I knew it, she knew it, we all knew it. Yet it was me that was getting the medal, and whenever I tried to tell the truth about her everyone simply clammed up and conversation became awkward. It was the damndest

thing I'd ever seen, how "normal" people reacted to the Dragon. It was almost as if they refused to accept her very existence. I'd tried to turn my medal down unless they gave her some kind of award too, but she'd come and called me a childish idiot and asked me what someone as divine and powerful as she was could possibly want with a filthy medal?

Someday, I vowed. Someday she would get the recognition that she deserved. In the meantime, she had earned my eternal gratitude and respect. I smiled at her, and she scowled slightly by way of reply.

She kind of liked me, I realized then for the very first time. Maybe it was the feathers? Several people had told me recently that they made me irresistible...

Then everyone was applauding and Commodore Tottson was holding up my medal and smiling, his teeth blazing out like an exploding galaxy against the eternal night. "...Order of Venus," the master of ceremonies was saying, "The Brotherhood's highest award for valor in the face of danger." Clumsily I climbed to my feet and walked across the stage to receive my prize, feathers fluffed and comb held proudly erect. I was going to stay a chicken, I'd decided, even after I completed my tour of duty as the Pussy Pilot. When you're a chicken, you learn right away where folks stand. It's easy to tell who your true friends are and who simply wants to laugh.

When I reached the dais, Tottson took my hand and squeezed it warmly. "The Venus Award," he said with a grin, after making damned certain that the mike was dead. "How utterly appropriate."

My feathered face remained perfectly deadpan as I made my reply. "Watch out for Uranus," I declared flatly. Then he laughed again, and hung the chain around my neck as everyone stood up and cheered, cheered, cheered. The silvery Morning and Evening stars now sparkled against my space-black tunic, just like they did on Commodore Tottson's, and would forevermore. Only four other living men wore the Order of Venus, though it was an honor that I shared with many dead ones. The Order was awarded posthumously far more often than not.

"I wanted to add something to your medal," Tottson continued. "Because of the very special nature of your accomplishment. But they wouldn't let me build in a vibrator, no matter how hard I pleaded."

For a long moment I just stood and gaped, my beak hanging open. Was *nothing* sacred? Then I thought of the swollen chrome trophy that was now mounted lovingly to *Aphrodite's* control panel, and which Tottson had promised would be accompanying me out to the Kuiper and far beyond, soon enough to the stars themselves.

And there, in front of the cameras and God and Mrs. Mayberry and everybody, I leaned my head back and laughed my goddamned ass off.



Season's Meaning

by M.C.A. Hogarth

"Are we done yet?" the slender foxine man asked. The expression of mild long-suffering he wore complemented his outrageous attire: six bags festooned his arms, plump paper wrinkled by the boxes inside, and he cradled another collection of boxes against his flat chest. Silver and gold wrapping paper winked from the well-dressed sides of these boxes, occasionally mediated by a bow in startling, metallic crimson. A similar bow had been adhered to his flagging rust-red tail.

"Done?" Alysha laughed. "But Terrell, I can still see a few slices of your uniform under there."

The Tam-illee todfox grumbled. "This is no way to treat an admiral, Lady."

"You just became an admiral this week," Alysha said, pale blue eyes a-twinkle. "Besides, no one takes the people in Logistics seriously."

"Just wait until a convenient coffee shortage strikes when a certain UAV Stardancer is up for resupply..."

Alysha laughed again and guided the man through the holiday traffic in the Heliocentrus Galleria. They had worked their way down to the second floor, though that had taken the better part of the day, two of several thousand people who had also decided to do their gift-buying at the largest mall in the Alliance's summer capital on Selnor. They were only differentiated from the stream of people by the austere black and cobalt blue of their uniforms... and those mostly obscured by the font of packages they shared the carriage of, Terrell's frequent protestations notwithstanding.

"Can we at least eat something?" Terrell asked, his eyes drifting again toward the pretzels.

"Oh, fine," Alysha said at last, tail curling in amusement. "Go! I'll stand by the rail while you stuff yourself."

Terrell sniffed. "Fine way to address a superior. Do you want anything, oh insubordinate one?"

"Maybe a drink."

Like a dog shedding, Terrell shook off the boxes and bags, leaving them at the woman's feet. "Done. I'll be back."

Alysha shook her head and watched him go, a smile tugging at her full lips. She turned and rested her elbows against the railing, a slim figure with dark hair and fur the color of rain. The festive bags at her feet glittered in stark contrast to her somber uniform, but the two seemed to belong together. The Galleria shone in gold and silver, glass shimmering and ornaments and brass stars hanging from every rail to celebrate the Order of the Universe, the Alliance's major end-of-the-year holiday.

But the Order of the Universe often coincided with other holidays celebrated by the multiplicity of species and cultures in the Alliance; the end of the calendar year was crowded with them. Rising up to the third floor and partially obscuring Alysha's view was a vast evergreen gaily decorated in stars, glass snowflakes and silver icicles, garlands of merry crimson and ivory balls and strands of fragrant nuts. Whether this tree had been intended for Christmas, as the angel on the tree's pinnacle suggested, or Yule, as some of the decorations intimated, Alysha could not decide. But the spirit of the holidays, the laughter, the bright colors and the noise lifted her mood. This joy and fierce beauty, this peace was the object of her protections as a Fleet captain. To take part in it was a privilege.

"There," Terrell said, brushing past a group of humans and Hinichi to reach her. He handed her a pretzel and a bulb of water, his own cinnamon twist half-devoured. "Eat. Ah-ah! I know you didn't ask for food. But you haven't eaten anything all day. You can't honestly not be hungry."

It was useless to say no, so Alysha didn't bother, particularly once the warm, yeast-and-butter aroma reached her nose. She sniffed at it, then nibbled. Salt crystals rolled over her tongue with the heavy bread

and slick butter. "Caloric," she murmured in appreciation.

"Delicious," Terrell agreed, leaning over the rain. "Pretty thing. Wonder where they got it."

"The tree?" Alysha asked. "I don't know. I've never seen a fir that tall."

Terrell squinted. "Is that a kid on it?"

"A what?" Alysha glanced at the tree. "You mean the angel?"

"No... the kid," Terrell said again. He pointed with one greasy finger.

Alysha blinked. What she'd taken for an angel ornament was actually a young Malarai boy, one of the winged felinesque races. He could not have been more than thirteen years old, by Alliance Mean, and his face betrayed both surprise and uncertainty. A quick scan of the balconies ringing the tree revealed a mother, or sister: a slip of a ghost-white girl with wings tightly tucked against her back and a bright red shopping bag forgotten at her feet.

"Looks like Mall security at the bottom there," Terrell said with a frown.

"I'll go talk to them," Alysha said, handing the Tam-illee man her pretzel. "Maybe you can go see if that's his mother up there?"

He nodded, plucking up his share of the boxes and heading toward her. Alysha took hers and walked down the stairs.

Dressed in green and gray and wearing alternating expressions of concern and irritation, the security guards were pacing around the evergreen's broad base. She hadn't realized just how thick it from looking at its branches at the second floor.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Alysha asked, stopping a few feet away and putting down her packages.

"No troub—oh. You're Fleet?" The human looked relieved. He gestured up at the tree as his colleague tried to shoo away the growing ring of spectators. "The boy... just... just jumped."

"Onto the tree?" Alysha asked. "From which floor? The third?"

He nodded, hands clenched into fists altogether too tight for such a simple problem.

"Why doesn't he just climb down?" Alysha asked.

"That's a thornfir off Hinichitii. We hoped it would deter people from climbing it, but we never anticipated someone would throw himself on it! He's probably stuck to it like a bug on a pin."

"Which is why you're not climbing it yourself," Alysha said. She stared up at the boy. There would be no way to Pad him down; just getting the smallest of Pad stations to that level would have been too difficult without also asking the boy to operate it. "What are you thinking of doing?"

"We were going to get him the ladder we used to decorate, but he's hurt and doesn't want to move," the man said. "So, we're investigating other avenues."

Alysha glanced at him, one brow lifted. "Which is to say you're stalling until you can figure something out?"

He nodded, a wan smile propping up his mouth.

"Someone will have to go after him," Alysha murmured. "Is it safe to jump onto?"

"It might dislodge him," the guard said. He paused. "You're not seriously thinking of..."

Alysha had already shucked off her uniform tunic, judging the scant protection the sleeves would have offered inadequate reason to keep it against the far more definite possibility that the length of the tunic would get caught on the thorns. She pulled off her boots and pants, leaving herself clad in the elastic black bodysuit that served as regulation undergarments.

"Watch my packages?" she said. "And get a rope or the ladder. My companion's up there with the woman..." She scanned the balconies until she found Terrell and the Malarai, waved to them. "So you might want to bring him down here."

"You're crazy," the man said. He grabbed her arm. "Look, I appreciate that you want to help, but you'll hurt yourself."

Alysha canted her head. "Do you have another plan?"

Had he had the ears and tails his people had bequeathed to the Pelted, they would have been drooping. She chuckled. "Let me up the tree. You can throw me a rope or get the ladder to me, I can get the boy down, and we can all go back to what we were doing."

He nodded reluctantly and stepped back.

Alysha ducked beneath the broad branches of the thornfir's base and studied the trunk. It was studded with prominent claws of bark, but they were as large as her hand; in some cases, nearly as large as both hands. They would be easy to avoid. The harder task would be moving from trunk to the tree's exterior. The thorns on the branches were smaller, impossible to avoid. At least the fir's needles were soft. Alysha shrugged to loosen the muscles across her shoulders and back, then pulled herself into the tree.

The first thing Alysha noticed, and the most prominent, was that thornfirs sweat. The thorns, the bark, the branches adhered to her body and clothing, coating her with a sticky, pungent sap. Her head swam with visions of pine needles and evergreen forests. Flexing her claws from her hands and feet, Alysha continued upward, ignoring the scrapes and cuts dealt by the branches she used as a ladder.

No one was more surprised to see her than the boy. He stared at her as she edged around the trunk and appeared from between two branches.

"Oh-my-god," he said, eyes round.

"No, just a friend," Alysha said, amused despite the situation. A good fifteen or sixteen feet separated her from the Malarai, clinging to the outside edge of the greenery. She could see the cuts on the insides of his arms from here, one a significant slice along the tender skin of his wrist and arm, still bleeding.

"You came to save me?" he said. "I can't get to you. I don't want to move..."

"That's fine. I don't want you to move at all," Alysha said. "What's your name?"

"Kessi," he answered and swallowed. "I don't know how much longer I can hold on here, ma'am."

Alysha chose her approach and started down the branch just beneath him. "Hold on a little longer, Kessi. I'll be there in a few minutes." She edged along the branch, bracing herself against a neighboring arm. The first few steps convinced her there was no way to avoid the thorns, so she walked on them. They dug into her foot-pads, pricking beads of blood from them.

Kessi stared as she approached. When she stood under him, he said, "Oh, you're hurt."

"You too," Alysha said. She reached out and took the bottom of his legs in her hands. "I have your feet... I just need you to slide backward, slowly. I'll catch you."

"Catch me! What if you miss?"

"I won't," Alysha promised, gripping the branch with the claws of her feet.

"What if we fall?"

"We won't," Alysha said.

"My sister will kill me if I fall," Kessi said miserably. "I just wanted to fly. I was sure I could."

Alysha, one hand braced against the neighboring branch, glanced up at him and felt a pang of sadness. "Not on a world this heavy," she said gently. The Malarai were too heavy to fly anywhere but in microgravity, their race the results of a unintentionally cruel gengineering experiment.

"I guess I knew that," he said, ears drooping. "But everything's so beautiful and looked so magical, I was sure I'd just float away." He sighed, then let go of the branch and slid into Alysha's arms. A faceful of feathers almost threw her off-balance, and she grabbed his waist and the nearest branch both, breath escaping in a hiss of surprise. For a few, heart-

pounding moments she teetered, breathnache claws threatening to slice through the branch she clung to like knives through warm butter.

Kessi leaned forward awkwardly, using a frond on the upper branch to steady them. "Sorry!" he said, looking over his shoulder and wing.

"It's okay," Alysha said. A chuckle escaped her. "I think I'm ready to get off this tree now, though."

"Me too!" he said with fervor.

Holding him close to her body, Alysha edged out and pushed apart two fronds. She used her free hand to carefully wave down to the guards. Terrell's expression was priceless.

"Who's that?" Kessi asked.

"A friend of mine," Alysha said with a grin, "Who is never going to short my starship coffee whenever it's up for re-supply."

He glanced at her at the mention of the ship, eyes round with wonder.

From the second floor, a third security guard tossed her a nylon rope which she snagged from mid-air. She tied it around her own waist, then glanced at the area around the fir. The ladder was nowhere to be seen. A tiny smile crept up on her. "So, Kessi... do you still want to fly?"

"Not if it means I have to stay on this tree!" He stopped and stared at her. "You really mean it?"

She nodded.

"Oh, yes!"

Alysha gripped him against her body and gathered the rope's excess with her free hand, gauging the length. "Hang on!" The Malarai scrabbled, wings half spread, and she jumped.

The rope squeaked as she swung in a low arc from the thornfir, the boy pressed against her chest with both wings spread and hands splayed. A wild torrent of giggles rushed from him as they flew through the air, rocking on the end of the rope in a steady, slow rhythm. The smell of pine sap mingled with his laughter, the sound of his heart thumping against her body, the sparkling gold and silver of the mall a-blur. Of such things, she reflected, are well-being made and measured, and she allowed herself a few precious minutes to enjoy it.

Alysha gently let the rope out so that they drew nearer the ground with every swing until they ran down the marble tiles. She released him and he pelted to his sister, who hugged him so tightly her petite wings obscured them both.

**A wild torrent
of giggles rushed
from him as they
flew through
the air, rocking
on the end of the
rope in a steady,
slow rhythm.**

"He's got a few cuts," Alysha said, joining the guards, the rope still tied around her waist. "One of them's going to need immediate attention, but the rest are minor."

"We'll see to it," the human said, as one of the other guards walked over to check on the two Malarai. He smiled and shook his head. "That was magnificent, lady!"

Alysha chuckled. "Maybe next year a less aggressive tree might be wise."

He laughed. "I'll see to it. And if you stop by the Keffenback Chocolate House, they'll have a meal for you, for helping us out. And for your friend." He nodded to Terrell.

"Thank you."

Alysha turned to the Tam-illee, who bowed gravely. "Your clothing, milady," he said, extending his arm. Her tunic and pants hung over them, as elegantly presented as by a butler.

She rolled her eyes and plucked up her tunic, examining her hands briefly. "Laelkii is going to be displeased," she muttered.

"The good doctor will have reason to be displeased," Terrell said. "But proud, too. And irritated. If you're going to run around saving the day all the time, would you at least try to keep yourself in one piece when you do it?"

"A few cuts and scrapes are in the job description," Alysha said, pulling on her tunic. A tug on her tail distracted her from picking up her pants and she turned to find Kessi behind her, the slender figure of his sister a few steps behind. She nodded to the woman, then went to a knee in front of the boy.

"Yes?"

"We can't really fly," he said.

Alysha shook her head, eyes resting calmly on his. They were an undifferentiated soft brown beneath his dark brows.

"Except in ships," he finished.

At that, she smiled. "Except in ships."

His eyes traveled to her rank badge and braids, restored to her left shoulder with her uniform tunic. The four golden tassels depending from the name tag held some of the glitter of the season, some of the golden splendor of the hall.

Then he straightened, even his wings mantling neatly behind his back, and saluted her formally, as Fleet officers do only on special occasions. Face solemn, Alysha stood and returned it.

As he marched away with his sister and the guards to have his arm seen to, Terrell stepped up to her shoulder and said, "They're never too young."

"Pardon?" Alysha asked, glancing at him.

"To be recruited, of course!" Terrell grinned. "You stink of evergreen, Captain."

"My nose keeps telling me I'm in a forest of the things," Alysha said, brushing at her uniform. Her

fur underneath the tunic stuck to her sleeves and she sighed. "What about that meal we were promised? Since our pretzels vanished."

"Hot chocolate and food sounds like an excellent idea, after we see you to a bathroom where you can run a medisealer up your hands and feet," the foxine man said. He gathered his packages and hers, sliding the bags over his arms until they bunched around his elbows like the crinoline of a particularly ridiculous gown. "After you, Madam Pine Tree."

"You are insufferable, Terry," Alysha said with a mock-growl.

He grinned and said, "Yes. By the way..." He rummaged in one of the bags and extracted one, handing it to her. "An early gift I found for you while you were on your adventures. Merry Order, arii."

Alysha glanced at the bag, looked inside and was aware that Terrell was laughing. Calmly she extracted one of the heavy gardening gloves, leaned over, and whacked his arm with them. Then with a sigh and a grin, she led the way.



Nobody Ever Cared for Gregory Wraithhome

by Joseph Vandehey

illustrated by Cara Mitten

I have noticed that of all the homes on Mission Street only mine has a window facing the park across the road. My home, too, is the only to have no porch and only one floor, but these are elements of necessity for me, not of choice. All the other buildings contain windows, yes, and porches and multiple stories too, but they do so for the inhabitants to look upon one another, to see across the gap of air and space that separate one man from his neighbor and see a reflection of himself there—a living mirror. So long as that building is the same as his own, the viewer feels content. I can think of no other reason why my own neighbors have curtained those windows that look down on my residence.

But the park: a small thing, really; bounded on three sides by Lincoln School for Orphans, and on the fourth side by a road which cars avoided—unless, like the design of my house, they were forced to travel it by necessity. Newly planted maples and apple trees dotted the park, though its name was Fir Park, and tour guides went through a great deal of effort to have the visitors forget the long-standing maples and apple trees and think only of the tall firs that once populated the surrounding land.

In the winter days before I began work at the Lincoln School for Orphans, I would often sit in my dining room, feet resting unrepentant on the table, and read while keeping an alert watch for any change in the trees caused by a chance breeze. On occasion, something else might pass through my field of view: the occasional tour group; or the principal on his morning jog about the school grounds; or a small boy, reading an equally small blue book while perched inside the nook of a tree. Whenever the tour group or the principal saw him up there, they took a moment from their routine to shout him out of the tree and send him scurrying back to the dormitories. I could never see the boy directly, though I could make out indistinct features about him. He wore an open-backed jacket even in the freezing cold, which

revealed a grey cross in his otherwise tan fur. His head was always bent down into the book, so I could make out little of his face or form except when he was fleeing from the adults.

Since, except for these occasional distractions from my reading, I had little in the way of decoration in my dining room, I placed quotes around the window. The dining room doubled as reading room and study, so I saw no reason not to have the wisdom of my betters at my fingertips. I chose quotes because the artist in me feels a deep connection to the brief snippets of speech offered by so many great men: how they managed to say so much in so little, I do not know (although in my quest to find out I have amassed a fair selection of quotation dictionaries, which I use as an additional decoration on my shelves). Above the window I have fashioned a small space to deliver only four words to my eyes: “Know thyself; study nature.”

On the fifth day after the New Year’s celebration, I started out of my door, cane in hand, to make the now-to-become daily trip to the school on the other side of the road. I had traveled the road before so that I would know the contour of every chip and block of concrete. I also practiced to build up my tolerance for the cold Pacific winters. My arctic fox heritage kept me warm most of the time, but I had spent too long in the heat of the southern sun with cold packs wrapped around my neck. I reached my office in fifteen minutes that day, five minutes faster than usual.

The principal, a short and stout lion who kept up the regalia of his office and species by the occasional jog past my window, was already in my office and smiled as I entered, holding out a hand for me to shake. I declined as my arms were trembling.

“Doctor Elliot,” he said, beaming, “welcome!”

“Thank you, sir,” I returned.

“I took the liberty of cleaning out your schedule this morning, in case any last minute preparations needed to be made.”

I took a seat behind the sole, small desk without another word. My silence eventually unnerved the principal who decided to leave with a short bow and a few words of luck.

I sat still in my desk until I heard the bell for first period, then waited ten minutes more to make sure that no classes were coming (despite whatever the principal may have believed). When none arrived, I exited my cramped office and perused the music rooms to make sure all was in order. The music department was small, but well supplied: a main room contained stadium seating, plenty of music stands, and a whiteboard. Branching off of the main room were my office and several closet spaces for storing instruments or practicing if there was enough room. In storage I found the basic modicum of instruments, some in finer shape than others—and even one padded piano!

I sat down in one of the chairs on the uppermost tier of the main room and waited. Half an hour later, the first students arrived; a small class made up mostly of youngsters around the age of ten and encompassing a wide variety of species from the common mouse to a tall whiptail lizard. The second and third classes were older, larger, but equally varied. The last class broke the trend of the day in two ways: by being the smallest class yet and having no herbivores to speak of.

The ten students filed into their seats automatically.

"Welcome," I said, repeating tone for tone the principal's sentiments for me and feeling quite silly for having done so. "I'm afraid that your previous teacher left me no notes as to your progress through this class, so I'm going to have to put one of you under the spotlight and ask where you left off."

The teenagers looked at me with a twitch in their eyes that nearly outdid my own. I pointed to a wolf in the front row, who blushed through his ears. He spoke softly: "We were studying the beginnings of Jazz."

"Ah!" I said, and a sudden spasm filled my face before I could work it properly into a smile. "Jazz - well, that is something. How far were you into it?"

"Barely," was the quick reply.

I waved my hand towards him and said, "Tell me more," but he only fidgeted in his seat, not at all comfortable with speaking before his peers. However, another student saved him from further embarrassment. A coyote from the back row answered in a timid, but nonetheless forceful, voice.

"Jazz is a derivative of African music, or at least has a great deal of influence from it. Jazz is famous for improvisation and seventh chords. While the origins of Jazz go back into tribal roots, Jazz first came to American attention through Tin Pan Alley, and first regarded as serious music through the efforts of

George Gershwin."

I nodded. The boy did have most of his facts right. "And are any of you familiar with any of the works of Mr. Gershwin?"

The wolf—taking an impressive bit of initiative—started snapping a finger to himself and singing "I've Got Rhythm" in baritone. I sat at the piano and tried to accompany him, but my left arm would not cooperate. I rested the failing arm across my lap and played the treble alone. A few moments later, I heard the bass and looked to my side to see the coyote from the back row playing along with me. The three of us together made a good show, receiving standing ovations from the rest of the class when we finished.

I stood and offered a bow to the two students who performed. "That, ladies and gents, is George Gershwin!"

At the end of the class, the principal again visited me in my office. "So," he said with an indiscriminate sweeping gesture to the music room, "how was the first day?"

"Adequate. I managed to learn enough about my students' previous experience in music to fashion a course outline. A few showed some rather exceptional talent."

"Like who?" The lion made the same gesture, though this time towards myself.

"Mostly in the upper grades: a singer, a violinist, a clarinetist, and a pianist."

"I didn't know anyone here could play piano."

"Yes; a coyote in the senior class."

"Wraithehome?"

"If that is his name," I left the rest of my sentence hanging, because the principal was looking at me like my fur had suddenly turned purple.

"I'll show you. Let me get his file." The lion was off before I could protest, and returned shortly with a thick file of papers under one arm. He tossed them onto the desk, panting rather badly—and, I noticed, wrinkling his blue dress shirt. "Here; take a look."

I did. The first few pages were general physiological information: height, weight, eye color, and the like, on down to his seasonal allergies. The next section contained grade transcripts from every year going back to first grade; then, the recommendations (which were as un-recommending as could be). On top of the first page was a note written by the previous principal, Mrs. Grundy: "Nobody ever cared for Gregory Wraithehome." I stared at that simple phrase for a full minute before moving on to the other comments, which explained Mrs. Grundy's words: every comment was a complaint of Gregory Wraithehome's character.

The principal left before I completed my perusal of the folder, so I promised myself to look into the matter the next time I saw Gregory Wraithehome, two days later. I called him into my office after class



and showed him the folder.

He rifled through it with a curious smile on his face.

"Seems you have every teacher in this school breathing down your back. Mind telling me why I got the chance to be on your good side?"

Gregory turned that same smile towards me. "You didn't slap my hand for playing with you."

"Do you play much?"

"When I can, about three hours a day."

Three hours—that impressed me more than anything else about him in the first days I knew him. I took him back into the music room. "Have a particular piece you like to play?"

He nodded and raised his hands to the keys. I recognized the piece from the first chord: the Revolutionary Etude, Fryderyk Chopin. He played like a practiced artist, rarely missing a key and knowing exactly why each note was placed in the score. He even covered for the piano's flaws as well as the piano would let him. To hear it, one would think he played on a merely untuned concert grand instead of a second-hand, schoolhouse piano.

He ended with a small flourish up the piano, and I sat there, quiet, contemplative, as though I had just listened to Chopin himself give a performance and was waiting in silence for him to stand and receive my applause. Gregory, though, continued sitting at the piano. He only took the briefest of moments to check that I was approving before launching into his next song, and the next, and the one after that. Gregory played Haydn, Scarlatti, Prokofiev—all from memory.

Then he looked at me and asked me to play.

"No," I said, "you saw what happened to me the other day."

"What did happen?"

I pointed to my jaw. "I'm sure you've noticed the twitch."

His ears flattened against his head.

"That is not contained just within my jaw, but also in my arms, my legs, and my heart on rare occasions. I tend not to do anything on a very consistent basis unless it requires solely my mind. I can play piano, but not especially well."

"What do you like, Doctor?"

I paused in my small monologue to stare at him. At the time, I did not understand what he meant.

"What composer?" he clarified.

"Ah, well, I do love the Russian composers."

"What did you think of the Prokofiev I played?"

"Wonderful, though I might have preferred Peter and the Wolf." I laughed as Gregory gave a shudder.

"Why not Peter and the Coyote?" he said with a slight howl on his voice.

"Too many syllables," I said, still laughing uproariously.

"Ok, why not Peter and the Fox?"

That I took a bit more seriously, but, still smiling, pinched my skin and shook my arm around like a dead twig. "Because foxes like me aren't as threatening as wolves, or even as coyotes for that matter."

"Don't tell Kyle that," Gregory said in reference to his wolf peer, now laughing too.

He stopped laughing as a crash echoed in my ears, along with an ear splitting, "Gregory!"

Inside the doorframe of the hall, a comically tall musteline stood, a pair of spectacles hanging loosely over her muzzle. "Gregory Wraithhome," she screeched, "You get over here right now and stop bothering Dr. Elliot!" She walked right up to the piano, plucked at Gregory by the collar of his shirt and dragged him back out of the room. I protested rather profusely at her taking Gregory away, but she only said, "This boy is a troublemaker, sir, don't let him bother you, really. We've all had to put up with him all his life."

She slammed the door behind her.

I fumed and stormed back to my office, but tripped on the way, cursing myself for having not brought my cane out with me. I had trouble standing, because my legs felt as though they had turned to jelly, shaking feverishly as I pulled myself along with my hands back to the office door and then into the office. I rested in my chair until dusk, correcting the few papers I had to fill time, and then set off for my house in the burgeoning night.

I took the file on Gregory Wraithhome with me. It proved very good reading that night, a welcome distraction from the pain and cramps that gripped my legs and from the pills and potions I had to take. I spread out the letters and notes of Gregory's various teachers across the table and fell asleep with their words staring up at me like puzzle pieces.

I had to call in a wheelchair so I could get to school the following day. After that, I could breathe easily: the first weekend had come, and I was ready to relax. Of course, relaxation for a music teacher tends to entail either practicing an instrument or in some way working with the students again. I went through all the storage rooms cataloguing the instruments meticulously from my wheelchair perch.

Gregory Wraithhome came in mid-morning on Saturday. I shut and locked the door after him.

"What's that for?" He asked.

"To keep you free from interruptions," I said and pulled out a large book of Brahms, arranging it on the piano. "And with plenty of new material."

Gregory sat at the piano with his arms tucked into the pockets of his sweater.

"You can't play like that," I muttered.

His mouth opened, and then shut before he could say anything potentially embarrassing. Gregory took out his hands and played a theme and all its variations

before adding an—albeit simplistic—one of his own to the end.

I stopped him before he continued on to another piece. “How does that piano feel?”

“Not too good,” he said, churning out a little piece of ragtime to emphasize the untuned bass. His lips parted—I thought he’d almost growl from the dissonance.

“They have a better one back in storage.” I pointed the door out to him, and he disappeared behind it with a bound in his step. A moment later, he yelped. I wheeled myself to the door and peered inside.

Gregory’s eyes were wide as he ran his fingers over the keys. “It’s padded!” He tapped one key experimentally. The gel on top of each key absorbed his claw without a single scratch to the ivory. The tone was flawless, too. “How did those penny-pinchers ever manage to get so nice of a piano?”

“I don’t know. But it’s here, in my storage, so feel free to use it.”

He was ginger, at first, with the new instrument. He played only light pieces, not wanting to test its power until he had seen its control. Then he pulled out Rachmoninov, and I swear a window shattered somewhere in the school that day. I grabbed a pair of earplugs for both of us, which had to be removed during the quieter parts of the same piece or else we could not hear it at all.

Clandestine lessons occupied much of my after-school hours that year. I would provide the music, the commentary, the critique, but mostly just the ear. Gregory never before had someone to play for. He had to work a little harder to imbue the music I heard with the music his imagination told him to play.

I hid the lessons by constantly locking the door after class hours, although the occasional passerby would knock, come in, and question me. I insisted that Gregory was only helping me by correcting homework and cleaning up after the long day. Even the stern-eyed musteline gave us a wide berth after that.

But I could not cover up the lessons entirely, and the principal himself came in early March. “These lessons must stop,” he said, as soon as he set foot inside.

“Why is that?”

“You are risking complaints against the administration,” he began, but I cut him off, feeling a bit more daring than my usual.

“Risking? So, no one has actually complained yet.”

“No,” and again I cut him off.

“Then I see little reason to stop. Besides, who do you expect to complain—besides the teachers? The students themselves have expressed a great desire to see his skill improve.”

The lion just shook his head, heaving a full body

sigh. “It won’t do, Elliot. You have to stop.”

I nodded slowly and gestured for the coyote teen to leave. He did, but as he reached the door I called out to him. “Oh, Gregory, I do have need of an accompanist for my vocal training. Please see me after school tomorrow.”

My father would have upbraided me for doing that in front of the principal, but pride has a way of hooking me. Besides, I felt that, on occasion, doing the impulsive thing was necessary. The principal, unable to argue against that point—at least, not then—turned on his heels and stormed out of the music room.

The next day, Gregory came in after school, but stayed away from the piano. I asked if he had something on his mind.

“Nothing really,” he said, “just found it interesting when the principal was speaking with you. I never heard your name pronounced before.” He paused, fidgeting with his hands in a way I had never seen him do before (he always used them in sure and deft patterns, the same way he played). “Are you related to General Elliot?”

“Yes; he’s my father.”

Gregory’s ears perked up expectantly. “I’m registered to join the army as soon as I graduate. Who knows, maybe I’ll meet him.” His hands started fidgeting again. “Though I am curious why you’re not with him.”

“I’m a liability. You saw what happened to me after my legs failed that time. The army can’t take me in, and I’m somewhat glad for it. I keep asking my father if he regrets my being able to join. He says he doesn’t.”

“Does he believe that?”

“I think he does.”

He smiled, wider than I had ever seen him smile before, and then we began to practice.

In the remaining three months afforded to us before Gregory set out for the armed forces, he learned to improvise. We continued our lessons of course, but we had to switch suddenly to a duet of his piano and my voice whenever someone entered so the illusion of his position as assistant only was maintained. I also had to teach Gregory how to make such transitions seamless, as only a few pieces he played had a melody within my range and capability to sing.

I know the principal still suspected me of giving lessons, but as he had no proof, and as he could not come up with a better reason for us to stop, he held his tongue and waited the three months. His inaction helped bring about a game between Gregory and I. Gregory often tried to trick me into singing the wrong note, and I sang such absolute gibberish that—when the teacher left, and we could end our silly duet—we would burst into fits of laughter.

We parted in early June, promising to meet again

when he could return home. His graduation was short, as there were so few still in his class. He received his diploma after the ceremony, thrust into his hands by the principal. I had to smile and offered him a hearty handshake before he set out.

"I still don't know what you see in that child, Elliot," the lion said. "I remember when I first arrived, Mrs. Grundy told me what an invalid he was. He never proved her wrong. Besides who ever heard of a coyote playing the piano? You have to pad every key. He should have practiced the violin or something, a much more sensible decision."

I sighed and waved good-bye as Gregory disappeared beyond the glass windows outside. With him gone, my schedule changed dramatically. I no longer had afternoon and evening filled with meetings for Gregory, so searched for other students. The wolf, Kyle, took voice lessons from me as he was staying to attend a nearby community college. Kyle did not have the same talent as Gregory, but, at least, the same determination.

Six months later, I had yet to hear from Gregory. Not knowing what else to do, I called my father. It took some convincing before the secretary would believe I was the general's son. Somehow, she could not place a relative of the illustrious General T. Elliot with a slight stutter in his voice.

A click alerted me that my father had picked up the receiver. "Who is it?" He asked, gruff as always.

"Fredyryck," I answered. "Good morning, Dad."

He let out a deep laugh. "Fredyryck," he said, before his voice took a sudden dip. "What's wrong?"

"I need to know what happened to someone, a student of mine who recently joined. His name is Gregory Wraithhome."

The sound of fingers tapping away at a keyboard echoed through the phone. "The computer's running a search. It'll take some time before it's done." I could hear his chair squeak, but whether because he stood up or sat down, I don't know. "How's the new teaching position suiting you?"

"Better than I thought, at first."

"At first?"

"I expected to come to a school where music was the lowest budgeted subject, where the average teacher sees me as a blemish on real education. Sadly, I was right."

"But you said it was better than you thought."

"It is: the students are quite avid about learning. I find it a bit strange - heck, my college friends weren't

near that excited about going to their classes." We had a slight chuckle together on that one. "So," I said, finishing up the customary conversation ritual, "Still getting along well without me?"

He started saying, "Quite," but a single beep interrupted him. He excused himself, and I could hear him typing on the keyboard once more.

Then came a sigh. "Gregory Wraithhome. A coyote? Piano player?"

I nodded, and then added "yes" as an afterthought.

"He's dead, son."

My voice choked and whined as I tried to reply. "When?"

"About a month ago, during a training session. A gun went off accidentally and clipped him at the base of the skull. The funeral's already happened. I'm sorry, son."

My voice squeaked again, but I tried to put on a smile and complete our ritual. "Still not sorry I couldn't be there with you?"

"Honestly," he said, and I felt something very cold and very large inside my throat. He had never deviated from the ritual. Never. His breathing was hard as though he were searching for the right words. "I was... until I realized I was only thinking of what I wanted you to be, not who you truly are."

My voice betrayed me. All it would do was squeak and hiss, until my father hung up the phone. I hung up the phone a minute later, but remained motionless in my desk, except for the occasional twitch of my muscles. My mind was running circles around what my father had just said, trying to grasp the impact of those two ideas: Gregory is dead, and I am not supposed to be here. Like one trapped in an eddy, I latched onto any thought I believed would take my mind off of the conversation, but I would only slip loose and plunge back into the same looping train of thought. I hummed songs to myself, but that would remind me of Gregory; I tried grading papers, listening to phone messages several times, doing whatever I could.

I stood up and paced around my desk, still running the conversation over and over again in my head, a broken record I could not stop. I swung around my desk, picking up my cane and my jacket and tromping out through the music room. I turned down the hallway, still thumping along madly, making far too much noise with my cane. I started down the stairs, feeling vertigo take over in the darkness. I had to slow down here, take it one small step at a time.

My legs buckled, and I uttered a sharp cry,

"I still don't know what you see in that child, Elliot," the lion said. Besides who ever heard of a coyote playing the piano?"

tumbling down the remaining steps. I landed less than five feet down, but still in terrible pain. My legs were wrenched in directions they should not normally be in.

And I was crying. A grown fox, already with enough regrets in my life—I stopped to cry.

I continued crying till morning, when the first student entering the building screamed at the sight of me (she thought I had died). The nurse came, then an ambulance, but they only took me down to my house, helped me inside, and wrapped up my ankles in some warming pads. No broken bones, not even a fracture, just a bad twist and strain.

I again had ample time to pore over the file of Gregory Wraithhome. The mystery of his life, I found, did not end with his death, but continually itched inside my brain, a question burning to be answered. If anything, Gregory's death made it more vital that I solve the mystery. Maybe I thought I was giving his life meaning this way.

I, again, arrayed the notes and files around me. Most were in page format, so my entire desk was covered. Only then, when I could see the majority of each piece at once, did I begin to understand. The connection was only a few words, tucked into the corners of each critique of Gregory's character: "Just like Mrs. Grundy said." Of course, each author said it their own way, but each referred back to the words of the former principal; I thumbed through each document and found it there. Every one of them, every teacher in Gregory's life had not judged based on what he did, but based on what Mrs. Grundy had said.

I ran my eyes over the note written by the previous principal. Over the heading was a date, when Gregory was some six years old. I don't know whether or not Mrs. Grundy had intended her words of reprisal for the young coyote to be taken so far, and I sincerely hoped she didn't.

I collected the notes, the whole file on Gregory Wraithhome, and dumped them into a bin I had originally used to pack my belongings in. I closed the lid, shut the file away, and never opened it again.

The principal—promptly late, as always—visited me at the end of the following weekend. He brought along with him a small box, though he shoved it away from him as soon as he entered, leaving it on the far side of my dining room table. "How are you doing, Elliot?" He asked with a touch of genuine concern.

I gestured to my wrapped-up legs. "I should be able to go to work as soon as you like, I'll just need the wheelchair again."

He gave a sideways nod, drawing his head from his left shoulder to above his right as he stared out of my window.

"Like it? It's the only window which looks out the park."

He turned back to me, and I could see from the

distant look in his eyes that he had not been looking at the window, but perhaps the items around it. He ignored what I had said, otherwise.

"I remember during the past winter that there was a boy who liked climbing the trees to read. He wore an open-backed jacket with a gray cross in his fur. You remember him?"

"Of course: Gregory Wraithhome. That boy never understood about respect: trees are not meant to be climbed."

I smiled and spoke half-audibly, "True, but the trees do not carry a grudge." Then louder: "He's dead, you know?"

"I heard. Those are his effects," he pointed to the box. "Your father sent them over two days ago. Rather prompt delivery, even for a slow week. But I must be going. Come back soon, Elliot, but take care of yourself."

I swept the box into my arms as the lion left and creaked open the lid with a slight flutter in my heart. I had no idea why these items had come to me, but looked through them eagerly: the first item was a small book of music theory, which was followed by several pages of piano music, all the composers I suggested he familiarize himself with. Next—a small picture of a coyote female who could not have been more than eighteen; I flipped it over and read aloud: "Marina Wraithhome, Ontario." Beneath the picture was a small wooden box that contained several dollars and some coins: Gregory's spare change. The last item in the box, outside of clothes and other common articles, was a small, blue diary. I set it aside, not wanting to intrude upon Gregory's privacy—living or dead—but a small piece of paper spun out of the diary as I set it down. I picked up the paper and read the lines that were so fateful in his life: "Nobody ever cared for Gregory Wraithhome."

I took the scrap, written in what looked like the fine cursive style of the former principal and torn out of a larger document, and some tape and placed the quote at the center of the window. Beneath it, I added in my own shoddy handwriting—as a rebuttal to the writer of that script—an epitaph to my friend and, quite possibly, myself:

"Nobody ever cared for Gregory Wraithhome
Except, that is, for the dreamers."





A Gathering of Tribes

by Robert Rubin

illustrated by Ayame Emaya

I decided to start a journal at the urging of one of the tourists last week. She was a nice person and all, and I felt bad about the weekend. It's kinda funny, sometimes. When you go to get away from your work, some people have a job fall in their laps. I apologized to her constantly, but I think she was really happy to see she helped someone.



Sal sat on the beach, looking up to the night sky. The tourists were a bit more inland with Taneh, drinking beers and sitting by the fire. Sal's ears perked as he heard the footfalls coming towards him. Human feet, Sal thought to himself with a smile. People who live in cities never know how to walk in the woods.

"Not a social animal?" Sal looked up to the woman, who had introduced herself as Dr. Bornstein that morning. She carried two beers in her hand, already opened.

Sal shook his head and patted the ground. "Not tonight. I'm sorry." Sal shifted as the woman sat next to him. "I've had a lot on my mind, and you're the first group I've had since coming back."

"Vacation?" the woman asked.

"No." Sal said. "It's kinda personal."

The woman offered Sal a bottle, which he took with a thanking nod. She looked back up to the sky with him. "Do you know where you're from?"

"Chicago." Sal said quickly. It was a standard line he used for the tourists.

She laughed. "I mean your home world."

Sal looked to the sky, and thought a moment. He then raised a paw, and pointed off toward Orion. "There," he said. "I guess I'm from around there, but I don't feel like it."

She gzed out at the stars for a moment. "It's amazing," she said. "You've been here for years, and yet so little is really known about your history."

Sal shrugged. "Not really something on the best sellers list, I guess. Not a whole lot of people seem interested."

She sipped on her beer. "If I said I was interested, would you tell me about it?"

His eyes still skyward, Sal turned and rested against a downed log. He ran his claw along the white bracelet he wore, and then looked to her. He studied her expression, and she seemed genuine. "Why do you want to know?"

"Professional interest," she said. "I've never had a chance to really talk with someone like you."

"You mean one of the 'landed', or just one that's actually acclimated?" Sal asked.

"Well that... But, I mean a mixed breed like yourself," the doctor said. "Taneh told us you were a raccoon and fox mix."

"Arctic fox." Sal said, with a finger in the air and a slight grin of pride. "Yeah, it's gotten me into trouble at times."

"Oh?" the woman asked. "How's that?"

"Well," Sal drank from his beer. "In the winter I like to go outside and collect shiny icicles." The doctor stifled a laugh. "And before you ask yes, that's one of my standard jokes too, Doctor."

"Please, call me Lynn." She coughed out between laughs. "I'm not in the office."

Sal nodded. "Ok, I can do that."

Lynn collected herself, and finally asked "So tell me about it. What was it like landing here?"



I didn't personally experience the whole history of how or why we ended up here, of course — much of what I know I learned from school. We were all part of a colonizing mission from our home planet, which I'm secure in the knowledge I will probably never see. Somewhere en-route the ships found this beacon called "Voyager", and it had an invitation. So, with that in paw, we came here.

It was an uneasy first few months. Seven ships landing all over the globe, trying to explain our intents were peaceful, well it just wasn't the thing most wanted to believe at the time.

That's where I came in. Well, me and a few thousand other cubs, kits, whelps, and whatever... Someone back on the home planet decided that children, with no pre-conceived notions of what life should be like, would stand the best chance of acclimating to a new environment. I never knew my real parents, and probably never will. I was placed into cryostasis before I was even weened. Naturally there were adults too, whole communities that volunteered to come along and help raise us.

Mixed breeds like me were expected to be able to adjust to a variety of environments, since no one knew what we would find. My mix has, well... over the years my nature and instincts has gotten me into trouble. Mix unbridled curiosity and the ability to outrun or outhide anything on the planet with a healthy dose of fearlessness, a pinch of kleptomania and a steel stomach and... Well I'm amazed I haven't broken any bones — just leave it at that.

So, when we were lead to this great planet called "Earth", it was already inhabited. No problem, really, we weren't here to take over, just cohabitate. And as it turned out a lot of our societies and belief systems were amazingly similar to humans'. Some argue that it's a sign collective consciousness, others claim it's some flavor of God at work, and some think it's all just a coincidence. I believe that the universe is way too well organized not to have some kind of grand plan, but I can't prove it. Made for some good philosophical debates in college though.



Lynn nodded, listening to Sal speak. Sal then leaned back, and drank a little more of his beer. "I've been meaning to ask you...What kind of doctor are you?"

"Psychology." she said. Sal rolled his eyes. "What? I thought your kind believed in it."

"We do." Sal said. "My dad went to one for years." Sal looked over her shoulder to see the wolf talking up a campfire story. "Did Taneh set you up to talk to me?"

Lynn shook her head. "No, no. I just recognized a few signs, and wanted to make sure you're doing alright." Sal tilted his head and let his ear twitch. "You're acting removed, not really joining in group activities, and that alone made me wonder. I know how social raccoons are."

Sal nodded. "It's been a long month." he said.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Lynn asked.

"Depends." Sal asked. "Are you a Freudian or something? If you are I really don't..." Sal let that drift as Lynn snickered aloud. "I just don't want to be told that it's a sex hang-up, because it's not."

"No, no." Lynn said. "I'm not. I have a few methods of treatment, but mostly I talk and let people talk to me." she said. "Couches are optional."

Sal sighed, and drink a little more beer. "Well, if you're going to dog me on it, I had a problem with the family recently." Sal took in a deep breath. "I lost my mother a month ago. She had cancer, and it spread fast, and last month..." Sal let the thought drift, sick of telling the story.

Lynn's face went from a smile to compassion. "I'm sorry." she said.

Sal stiffened up. "I know the sentiment is good and all that." He took a deep breath. "But, thank you. I know what you mean; I'm just sick of hearing that phrase."

Lynn nodded. "Are you mad that she's gone?"

Sal stopped, and thought about that. "Not really mad, I guess. It's just that... Dammit you're supposed to be on vacation here." Lynn nodded, but motioned with her hand that Sal should continue. "I'm not going to get off that easy, huh?"

"Sorry kid." Lynn said. "Doctor's oath, to help the sick and injured. And I know an injured heart when I see one."

Sal sighed, resigned. "Okay, let me tell you a bit about my family then."



I always knew I was adopted, naturally. Mom and Dad never talked about it, but I towered over both of them at a young age. That's not too uncommon for landed children who grew up on Earth, but combined with the fact that my eyes are blue and theirs are brown and my markings being so much lighter in color and thicker in winter, well... My sister is adopted too, but even though she is all raccoon my parents loved us both equally anyway.

My dad was trained to be in agriculture, and excelled at it. He also had a keen mind for business, so when he could combine the two, he did it. It took many years, but he did well for himself.

Most of the community from our original ship stayed together on Earth, even though it was common for raccoons to settle in Human communities too. Mom and Dad were happy that they could live with their old friends, though it meant that they never really integrated as well as we did.

I still speak our native language fluently, but I've got English down now. Mom never did get the hang of it, totally. She was of the old world, even if she embraced our new one. She insisted on inviting our human friends over for our traditional holidays, even if they didn't always eat or celebrate the same things we did. Looking back, I think she wanted us to immerse ourselves in human culture.



Sal smiled, thinking of her. "I can still hear her. You know how the accent is, right?" Lynn nodded. "She'd look at me and say 'You listen to me.'" Sal made motions with his hand, obviously emulating his mother and laying the accent on as thick as he

could. "If we didn't do what we thought was right we'd never be anywhere. We'd be right back on Kral where we started!" Sal laughed. "I'd get that speech a few times a week sometimes."

"She had ambitions for you?" Lynn asked.

"Doesn't everyone's mom?" Sal asked. He put his beer down. "I guess she did. And in the end, I think she's proud of me."

"So what happened?" Lynn asked.

Sal took in a deep breath. "A year ago she complained that her back hurt. Not unusual for the older Landed on this planet, as I guess the gravity is stronger than back on homeworld. But, anyhow, she went to a doctor..."



"Sal, you need to listen to me." Paal said on the phone. He was speaking in the old tongue, it was easier for him. Sal knew it was only used when something was wrong, and his dad couldn't concentrate enough to speak English.

"What's wrong?" Sal asked.

"It's your mother." Paal said. "We got back from the doctors here who said she has the beginnings of cancer." Sal slowly sat into his kitchen chair as his father spoke.

"It's in her pancreas. They can't operate on it, but they have treatments we can try."

Sal brought his elbows onto the kitchen table, and sat in shock. "Will she be ok?"

"Well, we don't know." Paal said. "You need to know that the survival rate is low, only a percent or two. But you know your mother." Sal let out a forced laugh. "We will do everything we can, I can promise you that."

"If there's anything I can do, let me know." Sal said.

"I will. But be strong. We'll all be strong." Paal said.

Sal wandered into the living room with a beer some time later, and placed it on the floor. He laid down on the couch, rolling his tail over the back. Taneh wandered in a while later to see Sal staring at the TV. "What's on?" the wolf asked.

"Nothing." Sal said sullenly. He spoke in the old tongue.

Taneh looked to the screen, then to Sal. "You know it's more entertaining if you turn it on before you watch it."

Sal nodded, looking into the space that happened to occupy the TV. "Dad called." Sal said in english. Before Taneh could say anything, Sal added "You may need to sit down. She's got cancer."

Taneh looked to Sal with disbelief. He didn't say anything, only knelt next to him on the couch and gave him a long hug.



"At first I joked about it." Sal said. "You know, typical 'coon or fox instincts. I first said I'd only get worried about it if Mom stopped golfing."

"She did?" Lynn asked.

"Five months from diagnosis." Sal said. "Then I said I'd only worry if Mom stopped shopping. She did. Then I'd only worry if Mom stopped playing backgammon with the neighborhood ladies." Sal sighed. "She stopped doing that a month before she died."

Sal looked at the sand. "Then I told people I'd only worry if Mom stopped watching Wheel of Fortune. It was all coping stuff, ya know. As long as there was something there, I could hold out."

Lynn nodded. "Did you have a chance to see her or talk to her? Before she passed?"

"Yeah." Sal said. "If you could call it that."



Near the end of winter I talked to Mom on the phone. She sounded a little out of it, the chemo was taking it's toll on her again. We didn't talk long, because she was tired. She was tired a lot. Taneh saw me sitting at the table and gave me a hug. "Mom?"

"Mom." I said.

"What's up?" He pulled up a chair.

"They've changed her meds." I said. "It's spread from her pancreas to her liver, and they can't stop it."

"Can't they give her something?" Taneh asked me.

I knew mom had already been through the wringer of drugs. The chemo was poisoning her system, they couldn't do radiation therapy because it's so deep in the body, and I knew the doctors were running out of options. "They're starting her on a permanent IV drip and some painkillers." I told him. Taneh held my paw as I talked. "She's strong. I know she'll be ok. You know, we landed on this dirt ball on a space ship. A SPACE SHIP! And we can't cure this?" I was mad, but I was trying not to take it out on Taneh. My 'coon side is emotional, but I usually can keep it in check. I was losing the battle this time. Taneh looked at me with this look, reassuring but at the same time letting me know he was there. I remember he patted me on the shoulder too, it was nice to know he wasn't angry at me.

Then the summer came around. I was caught up in our business, mostly to escape what I knew was coming. I called Dad one day, and talked to Mom for a moment. The conversation was bad, because I could tell Mom was way out of it. She slurred an entire sentence into one word. I could hear my sister's kits running around in the background. And Mom just kinda took it in stride. "Ohyah" she said, sorta sing song, but mostly in a haze. "I'm really tired." she said, over and over. It felt like a knife twisting in my heart.

Dad got back on and told me the news. Along with her meds to help her system boost itself back up, Mom was taking a new medication. Liquid morphine, as needed, for pain. I realized then that her treatment had gone from attacking the cancer to comforting her. They had given up. Dad kept on trying to keep it upbeat. "We've got permission from the FDA to try an experimental drug." he said to me. "It's meant for humans but we think it will help your Mother. We'll start on that in two weeks." He offered to give me web pages I could look it up at, and I did. It was a human drug, never tried on our kind before. "Mom's just confused right now." he told me once on the phone. I knew differently... she was doped out of her freaking mind.

Dad's way is to never be the bearer of bad news, more like a messenger who brings you the telegram and lets you read it. It's a raccoon thing, from the old world. The fox in me is more direct than that, which

is why I argued a lot with my Dad over the years. But, in this case, It was a matter of family. I felt like I was going to cry when I hung up the phone, and Taneh was behind me before I even put the phone down. His hunters' instinct is strong, he knows my moods before I do, sometimes.

"Go." he said. "I can cover for you." I smiled, and hugged him. "I love you too." he said quietly, caressing my fur gently. I was out the door before sunset and back in Chicago before Midnight. Mom's sister, my Aunt Szay, was already there, sleeping in the guest room. I slept in my old room, which in itself was strange. The next few days are almost a blur. Mom was in and out of consciousness repeatedly. In one case, she passed out during dinner, dropping a cup of water onto the floor. She'd pass out in the middle of "Wheel". In the back of my mind I was still in denial, I mean, Mom had fought this long, she can make it.

I spent a lot of time with my extended family. Cyndy, my sister, she married a human male. Great guy, actually. I got to know him better that week. We went to a baseball game, and talked about things. My sister's kids, and that's another story entirely, were running around, having a good time. The innocence of youth.

But the one thing that I'll never forget... I had to go home, and I thought things were stabilizing out. Aunt Szay had flown home, there was a nurse there for her too, I felt like it was OK to leave. So I knelt



Illustration by Ayame Emaya

down on the bed with Mom. Her glasses were off, so I knew she had a hard time seeing me. She didn't look too good, but I figured it was the drugs. The chemo had taken its toll on her. What fur she had left was in clumps. But, it was starting to grow back in places too too, that's the part that gets me.

"I gotta go home Mom." I said. She nodded, and I could see she was choking back tears. "I love you Mom. Everything's going to be OK." She put her paw up to my face, and looked at me. It wasn't a vacant stare, like she'd had a lot to that point. It was in intense look, she was burning my face into her memory, like it was something she knew she was going to take with her. In my head I knew what it meant, but in the back of my mind I was still in denial.

"I know." she said to me. "Drive safe Sal." her voice was weak, I knew she was fighting to get every word out. "I love you." I was fighting tears too, I didn't want to cry in front of her. Dad told me to be strong, and I tried. I hugged her, I kissed her, I held her. I did all I could do for her. I didn't want to leave, but I knew there was nothing left for me to do. She did tear up, and I used a tissue near the bed to wipe it from her eye.

"I'll see you later, Mom." I said. She nodded, and closed her eyes, drifting into sleep again. I got up off the bed, walked past dad. "Call me if anything happens, ok?"

"I will." he said. We hugged. Dad was never really comfortable doing that, but I needed a hug desperately. I went out to my car, started it, and drove out to the main street; but before I could go anywhere, I put it in park and had a cry. Something in my mind snapped, and I knew what was going to happen. I drove home anyway, and collapsed next to Taneh in our bed several hours later.



Taneh hung up the phone quietly. Sal only got there the night before, and collapsed in his clothing into bed. The wolf looked into the bedroom, and saw Sal's tail whip in his sleep. Sal was having a bad dream again. Taneh closed his eyes, and started to cry. Not at the news, but at what he knew he had to do.

"Sal?" Taneh knelt down next to Sal, rubbing his fur gently. "Sal?"

Sal's eyes opened, and he rubbed his paws against his mask. "What's wrong?" Sal could see that the wolf was crying. Sal knew what it meant. "When?"

Taneh nodded. "At six this morning." Sal took in a deep breath, and Taneh laid down with him. "I've already called everyone here. We're clear for three weeks. I'm going with you, and you can't stop me." It wasn't defiance as much as a show of solidarity.

Sal bit his lower lip, and closed his eyes. "Hold me?" Taneh did, and the two of them held each other for a long, long time.



"Have you ever been to a raccoon funeral?" Sal asked.

Lynn shook her head. "I've heard a few things, but I've never been to one."

"You make it sound like an orgy or something." Sal said, trying to force the jokes. "I guess we keep it to ourselves. Actually, it was weird. We have a lot of Jewish friends in the neighborhood, so it was like some kind of weird crossbreed between our traditions and theirs." Sal thought a moment. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?" Sal ran his fingers through his light-colored tail fur, which got a laugh from Lynn.

"So what do you do differently?" Lynn asked.



"First there's no shoes allowed after the ceremony." Sal said. Taneh was driving through Milwaukee as Sal explained things. The wolf crinkled his muzzle. "Tradition."

"So we all get to smell each other's feet?" the wolf asked with a grin. "Sounds kinda kinky. Why?"

"I really don't know why." Sal said. "I think it's to keep us inside. We're not supposed to leave the house or property. And I guess you can't do that without your shoes, huh?"

"We do." the wolf said.

"Hey, I don't understand the origins, just that we do it." Sal said. "I know that the place is going to be packed with relatives, friends, family, and some other people too. It's like a sleepover."

"Now it really does sound kinky!" Taneh said with a wink.

Sal laughed a little bit, forcing himself to try to be somewhat upbeat. "It's more like a depression watch. Everyone in the community makes sure that the family is ok. You know how raccoons get."

Taneh rolled his eyes. "You mean it's going to be worse than your mood swings? That's it, we're going home!" The wolf tried to look angry, but snickered to himself.

"You're joking a lot about this." Sal said curiously. "That's not like you."

Taneh thought a moment. "I'm just trying to do what you do." he said, with sincerity. "I thought it would help."

"It does." Sal said. "Thank you."



When we got to Chicago, we found a full house. Mom's backgammon friends were in the kitchen with a macabre list of things to do. Aunt Szay was back, as was my dad's family. I was at the point where no words needed to be said, Dad greeted me at the door with a hug, and then Taneh with a hug too. Cyndy did too. It was weird, nobody was saying much of anything.

I stayed up for hours with Cyndy, talking about Mom and Dad. It was helpful, actually. I found out why they didn't have their own kids. Mom couldn't,

so they adopted. I found out Mom held me as her favorite, and she felt bad for some of the things that happened to me. Like never really explaining to me why I was half raccoon, half arctic fox.



"At least you had family there." Lynn said.

"I guess." Sal said. "It was good to be there, talk to people. We got a lot of stuff out of the air. That and I got to see Aunt Megan again. She's a character. Dad's brother married a human, one of the first human and landed marriages. You can imagine what kind of a woman it would take to marry a raccoon. She made it a lot easier for me to cope." Sal held up his bottle again. "She went out and got beer and cigars. We got smashed together when everyone else went home. She's cool."

Lynn nodded. "So what else happened when you got home?"

"Well dad became a pusher." Sal said. "He was trying to get me to take some kind of human drug he had prescribed to him for anxiety. I figured I could just drink if I wanted that. Aunt Szay's kids were taking them tho. Not my thing." Lynn nodded with a smile. "But we did the funeral the next morning. That was it's own Darsas."

Lynn's mouth crinkled up, then she remembered a little of the "Landed" mythos that "Darsas" was similar to human "Hell" in slang terms. "That bad?" Lynn asked.

"Well, I kept telling people 'This Sucks', and nobody got it." Sal said. He shook his head. "I mean, it sucked. A lot of people showed up, and that was ok I guess. It just sucks that you never know how many friends you have until it's too late to appreciate it." Sal took in a deep breath, like he was holding this back and finally able to express his feelings to someone else. "It sucks that it had to happen. It sucks that the only way to really know about someone is after they go. It sucks that nobody wants to talk about the real things that happened, and only want to remember the 'Happy times.' It sucks that you can't express what you really feel without having someone else feel offended or seem like you're being insensitive. It sucks that you can't remember the real things that are important." Sal wiped a tear from his eye and sniffled once. "It sucks that I can't figure out how in the world Mom made her beef soup." Lynn smiled. "You laugh, it was good stuff." They sat quietly a moment. "But yeah, the funeral sucked."



A lot of my friends scattered to the winds after High School, but that's to be expected. Only one could show up, Bruce. One of my good fox friends. His comment was probably the most accurate. "It looks like a mob funeral." he said. I guess he was right. Everyone wore sunglasses, myself included. The humans wore black, the raccoons wore black,

everyone showed up with nice cars, the humans had gray hair for the most part, dad's friends had some silver fur... It was kinda like a mob funeral without security guards and guns.

I held my composure, bit my tongue, and held it together. Our tradition is to bury the dead right away, which was a slight shock for some of the humans. We also incorporated one of the religious rights from Judaism. Several of our human neighbors are Jewish, and we shared holidays together all the time. Dad thought it fitting to include it, and he said that he and Mom talked about it before the drugs made her "confused". "It is customary for the community to help the departed pass on her way." the rabbi said. "We invite everyone who wishes to help JI'lann on her final journey, the final favor we can give her as a community."

I did what needed to be done, barely. Many of our friends did the same. I wanted to go home after that, I wanted to be out of there. Dad's boss found us then, tears streaming from her face. She's a big panda, a wonderful woman if not a little overbearing sometimes, pardon the pun. "I'm so sorry!" she said, giving me a big hug from out of nowhere. That's when I lost it. I don't really remember the drive home, I just remember crying a lot. A whole lot. Everyone had said "Be strong for your father." or "Be strong for your sister." or "Be strong for Aunt Szay." In the end, the dam broke, and we all collapsed into each other, crying and sobbing.

I walked in the door, and threw my shoes into the laundry room. I didn't even bother looking where they landed. The flood gates were open, and I was emotionally stripped. Looking back, Taneh was devastated too, as much at my reaction as the situation. I don't think he'd ever seen my raccoon side come out so strongly to that point.

It took me the better part of an hour to get myself back together. Taneh was there the whole time, holding me, doing what he could but I was totally gone. It was a good thing too, I think I set Aunt Szay off, Dad's wasn't as bad, but I think that was the drugs he was taking. Cyn fell apart too, she leaned on her husband who tried to understand what was going on. Unless you've got it in you, you don't understand it. But we had a family cry there, in the front room, just falling on each other in raw emotions.

Now, I hate to backtrack, but I need to. My fox nature had been protecting me a lot up to that point, giving me something to hide behind when it got bad. I kept throwing jokes around because that was the only armor I had. On the way down I was reciting, word for word, Bill Cosby's routine about funerals. "Don't I look like myself?" became a joke phrase for the week. One thing I told Taneh is that the funeral would be a catered affair. He laughed it off, figuring

I was kidding. He'd never been to a raccoon funeral before, poor wolf.

A few hours after we got home from the cemetery, food began to arrive. Deli trays, veggie trays, meats, cheeses, drinks, everything. Soon after, Taneh pulled me to the side. "You weren't kidding."

"I told you." I said. "Just wait. This house will be packed by nightfall."

"You've done this before?" He asked.

"Yeah." I said. "Back in high school one of the kids died in an OD incident. We held the ceremony for the raccoons in the school gymnasium, we filled it."

"So what happens?" He asked.

"Like I said, a sleepover." I said. "Well, the real name for it is a 'poslah', but basically you surround yourself with family, friends, food, and you take a day or two to remember. Friends come and go, but it's traditional to spend a night if you're able. Oh, and no shoes. It's tradition."

"Still sounds kinky." he said, taking off his shoes.

"Stop it!" I said with a smile, using my claws to playfully scratch his muzzle. I felt better after the front room incident, Taneh was helping a lot. "It's actually so you can get it out of your system, and try to move on. That and we... I mean raccoons..." Taneh motioned like he understood. "We're social by nature. When one passes on, we get really down, having friends over to keep sort of an emergency watch is almost mandatory."

Taneh stopped to think about that for a moment. "Can I make a phone call?"

"Why don't you stick your head out the window and howl?" I asked jokingly.

"Now you stop it!" he said with a wicked grin. "I'd never be able to reach who I need to talk to from here." I pointed to the phone, and he made his call. Dad, meanwhile, was sitting at the dining room table with some friends of his. It was weird, because for the first time I can remember, they had a conversation that lasted an hour that never included work.



Sal finished the last of his beer. "Then the photo albums came out. Then the stories." Sal put the bottle down. "All the stories. About getting married before leaving the home world, them being given myself and Cyn, and all that. We sang songs, we drank." Sal shook his head. "Wow did we drink. Who needs 'Zac when you've got beer?"

Lynn got a laugh from that. "Beer wears off in a short while." she said, pointing out the difference. "But I understand. So it really helps? The poslah?"

"I think so." Sal said. "I mean, we got to let it all out. I think that helps the most, really. You get to let it all out, and it's ok. Humans, you tend to bottle up your feelings because you don't want to appear weak to each other. My fox side is like that, I know when I'm being headstrong to keep up appearances.

But when I can let the other side flow, with other raccoons, it feels natural. Everyone gets their emotions out, and on the table, and it's a release."

Lynn thought a moment about that. "It would put me out of a job."

"Not really. Sometimes you can't deal with it." Sal said. "Sometimes, you get lucky."

Lynn let the comment trail off, knowing when to stop prying. "Want a refill on that beer?"

Sal looked at the bottle, then to her. "It's ok. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Lynn smiled. "If not, you know I'm coming back." She got up, and dusted her jeans off before returning to the fire. Taneh was telling an old story of the river, the "Big Fish" story as Sal called it. He knew better than to walk in on it. Instead, he looked to the moon, and smiled.



It was a few days after the funeral. After the two days, I needed to get out. So did Dad. The Alberts took him golfing, which I found touching. They usually had a foursome with Mom, but even without her they went. I guess, in a way, it was their way of saying they would help Dad, and she was there too, just not in body. I stayed for another few days with Taneh, before figuring I could safely leave.

It was in that time that Dad came up to me and Dad pulled me aside. "Mom wanted to be there when you got married."

"I'm sorry." I said. "I haven't found..."

"Yes you have." Dad said abruptly, and I felt like I was going to collapse. "It's ok. I talked about it for a long time with Mom a long time ago, and never talked to you about it."

"About... what..." I stammered out.

"If you want to live with the wolf, go ahead." Dad said. "Mom asked me to make sure you're happy. I can see that you're happy with him. I don't understand it, but what's to understand about love?" Dad's accent was still thick, and his mannerisms were as they always have been. "If you two ever get married, or whatever wolves and raccoons do, She'll be there in spirit, with you." I could feel myself tearing up, and I reached to hug dad. He stepped back. "Don't get funny ideas Sal." He tried to force a joke, but I didn't care, I hugged him anyway.



Sal poured water on the fire to put it out as Taneh packed the gear for the day's paddle. The humans were finishing their breakfasts. Satisfied he did a good job, Sal walked back over to the wolf. "Ready to go?"

"Just about." Taneh said, scratching Sal between the ears. "You ok?"

Sal nodded. "I'll be ok. Just had a lot on my mind."

"Soaky luv." Taneh said. "Just don't worry me, ok?" Sal nodded.



Taneh got out of the car, and looked around in the darkness. He sniffed the air a few times, and caught the scent of raccoon and fox musk. He followed it to a bicycle. Taneh shook his head and looked up the hill. He figured Sal must have been upset to pedal thirty miles in a day then climb up to Kitchen's Cave.

Sal sat near the ledge, looking across the city below him. "Hi Taneh." he said, catching the scent before Taneh got to him. "You're stalking upwind."

"I'm not stalking." the wolf said. "You left a trail." The wolf sat down behind his friend, straddling his body to let the 'coon lean back into him. "You don't come up here much anymore."

"I needed to get away." Sal said. "But I didn't want to hide."

Taneh stroked Sal's tail gently. "Is this more of that fox and coon thing? Bright enough to run, but not enough to mask a trail?"

Sal shook his head. "No. More like I wanted to be away from everyone." Sal leaned back to Taneh, who held him. "After last week, I felt a little trapped in the house. I needed out."

The wolf nodded, stroking Sal's chest fur gently under his t-shirt. "I wanted to tell you something, and I guess now is as good a time as any." Taneh held Sal to him. "I talked to my elders, we're going to have a howl in your mother's honor this weekend."

Sal looked over his head at Taneh. "But I thought you only did that for other wolves?"

"And their families." Taneh said. "Your father likes me, and I like your family. Now I'd like you to meet mine." Taneh shrugged. "Who knows? We may be able to talk someone into performing a pawfasting." It took Sal more than a few moments to register what the wolf had just insinuated.

Sal bit his lower lip gently, and rolled over to be belly to belly with Taneh. He locked his eyes with the wolf, and felt himself shake slightly. "Tell me you meant that." he asked, almost desperate.

"I did." the wolf said. Sal kissed Taneh passionately.



Sal rubbed the rope bracelet he wore with a happy sigh as he secured the packs to the canoes. Lynn was in his boat with another person. "Ok!" he said cheerfully. "We'll paddle to Prarie du Chien by tonight, and we'll get picked up from there."

The tourists raised paddles with a cheer. Taneh put his sunglasses on and pushed his boat out. "Don't celebrate yet!" he said "We could still run into... THE MONSTER CROPPIE!!!! AAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!" He made panicked screams in mock horror as the tourists also made mock terror screams with a lot of laughter.

Sal looked back to the campsite, and saw the site was clean and the fire was out. As they pushed off, he leaned towards Lynn "Thank you." he said.

"My pleasure." she replied, adjusting her hat. "Let's shoot these rapids!" She giggled with the others as Sal paddled out with Taneh's boat



When we got home Lynn wouldn't let me pay her for helping me. So I demanded she take a free cap and t-shirt instead. She did, which made me feel better. Her group asked about this fall too, they want to come up when the leaves turn.

Taneh did ask me about what we talked about. I told him the truth, it was about Mom, but not about Mom. In the last few weeks I've been thinking about this heavy stuff, life and death, what you leave behind, what you enrich the world with when you leave. And I guess that in the end, all you really can leave is not the physical things of life, but the good stuff that you can't touch.

Love, happiness, stories, legends, friends, family... all things you really can't grasp but you can leave when the body is gone. I miss Mom, but I know she approves. Dad was there for the pawfasting, he thought it was beautiful. He said Mom would have liked it too. I like to know that, actually.

I suppose I should call this an entry, at this point. We have a group tomorrow that wants to go pretty far down river. Taneh told me one is a cancer survivor, and wanted to make sure with me that I would be OK with it. I told him to take the booking, and I'd be perfectly ok. And now, I think I will be. I love you Mom.



Illustration by Ayame Emaya





John Nunnemacher
2006

First Light

by Tim Susman

illustrated by John Nunnemacher

Terry woke and pushed his muzzle into the pillow with a groan, gathering it up and jamming it around his ears as well. After a few minutes, he realized that the iron fist squeezing his brain was not going to relax on its own, so he pushed back and got to his paws and knees, long ropy tail curled around his leg. He covered his muzzle with his paws, breathed a few times, lifted his head, and noticed the brown shape curled up to his right.

Free of his paws, his nose picked up the otter's scent, as well as a few others that told him what had gone on in the bed the previous night. He lowered his muzzle to his paws again and rubbed his eyes, then rolled over on his side.

The otter's chest rose and fell, half-revealed by the blanket. Terry studied his muzzle, the large black nose and the way his whiskers twitched in his sleep. He had two silver rings in his right ear that caught what little light filtered into the darkened room...

...the rings flashed blue and gold as he spun under the lights, and his dark eyes gathered the spotlights and shone on Terry, who was just looking up from his fourth scotch...

He blinked at the memory. This had to be that same otter, though in the dim natural light of the bedroom, he didn't look nearly as sleek. Terry reached out to smooth the ruffled fur, knowing before he did how soft it would feel. He kept his claws retracted, and limited himself to the briefest of touches.

The phone shrieked its series of high-pitched beeps directly into Terry's skull. He dove under the pillow to wait out the mercifully short ring, cut off as the voice mail kicked in.

"Ohhhhh..." The low moan was followed by some stirring beside him, then quiet again. He peered out.

The otter's half-lidded eyes looked back at

him, impenetrable and dark. Terry counted five heartbeats of wondering what the otter would say before he got a smile and a whisper. "Your alarm is way too early."

"It's my phone," he whispered back. "Sorry."

"Then your friends are way too early." Terry saw his nose twitching and saw memory creep back to the otter as it had to him. "Listen," the otter whispered, "I sure as hell hope you don't know my name, because otherwise I'm gonna be too mortified to ask you yours."

"Terrence. Terry," Terry said with a half-laugh of relief.

"You sure that's your name and not mine? No, wait, mine's Aaric."

"Eric?"

The otter shook his head, then winced. "Ow. Yeah, but not spelled like you'd think. It's got two a's."

Terry tried to puzzle out how to fit two a's into "Eric" and gave up quickly. "You don't remember last night either?"

"I remember some things...I remember dancing with you...at least, I think it was you. Or some other six-foot-tall tiger..."

...Terry is a better dancer when drunk, he believes, and the otter is matching him step for step. Exhilarated, laughing, he pushes himself further, and the otter laughs with him, as if he's looking into a funhouse mirror that has made his reflection a foot shorter and darker...

"And we came back here..."

"Yeah." Aaric looked down at the pillow. "I don't usually, y'know, go home with guys..."

"Me neither," Terry said quickly.

"I did check your fridge, though." Aaric grinned feebly.

"Huh?"

"You remember that guy...whatsisname, the fucked-up lion, picked up kids and ate 'em? Kept

'em in his fridge."

"Oh." Terry managed a chuckle.

"Sorry. I'm usually much funnier than this." Aaric pressed a paw to his forehead.

"That's okay. I'm usually..." Terry trailed off. "You want to use the shower?"

"Uhhh. You can go first."

"Okay." Terry started to slide out of the bed and then stopped. His boxers lay halfway across the room. "Um. Don't look, okay?"

"Sure."

Terry slid out of bed, keeping his back to it, and padded quickly to the bathroom. Whatever strange place he and Aaric had been in last night, where nakedness between strangers was acceptable, was gone now. He closed the bathroom door and felt immediately safer again, back in his own environment. Of course, the bathroom and shower were more Linda's environment than his: the fluffy pink cover on the toilet seat, the matching fluffy pink rug on the white tile floor, the majority of the medicine cabinet, and the five different fur care products and eight different brushes on the shelves next to the sink, not to mention the six different shampoos and three conditioners in the shower itself.

Strange, he thought as he swallowed a pair of Linda's Motrin, that his reaction to her departure had been not sorrow, anger, or self-righteous superiority, but a desperate jealousy that this morning had mutated into guilty resignation. He put that aside and stepped into the shower, focusing on the wonderful warmth of the water and letting it soak into his fur.

Aaric was still lying in Terry's bed when he came out with his towel wrapped around his waist. "Can I look now?" the otter said through his pillow.

"Yeah. I brought you your choice of breakfast."

Aaric groaned, lifting the pillow. "Oh, God, I don't want...oh." He grinned when he saw the two bottles Terry was holding out. "I'll have two Motrin, over easy."

"Coming right up." Terry shook them out into his paw and handed them over, along with the glass of water he held in his other paw.

"Mmm." Aaric downed the pills with the water. "My compliments to the chef."

Terry grinned. "Shower's free. You can use the towel on the shower rod."

"Thanks." Aaric rolled out of bed in one smooth motion. Terry didn't have time to avert his eyes, but it didn't matter; Aaric must have retrieved his boxers and put them back on. He stumbled into the bathroom and closed the door.

Terry started to make the bed, out of habit, then pulled the sheets off and threw them in a

pile by the closet. He started to pick up the other clothes lying around the room, sniffing them to separate his from Aaric's. His went into the pile with the sheets; Aaric's he folded and placed on the bed. Then he opened the closet door and turned on the light, and immediately felt silly for using electricity in the middle of the day. He turned off the closet light and went to the window, where the sunlight strained to burst through the curtains, leaking around the edges.

Bracing himself, he opened the curtains and let the sun stream into the room. The sharp light revived his headache momentarily, until his eyes adjusted. Keeping a protective paw over them, he looked around the room. It wasn't as bad as it could've been, he thought, picking up a matchbook from the floor. The matchbook cover, shimmering silver, bore the logo "Club V," which Terry took a full minute to recognize as the name of the club he'd been to last night. Aaric didn't smell like smoke. Maybe he collected matchbooks. Terry placed the matchbook on Aaric's pile of clothes.

The hiss of water in the other room stopped. The awareness that he would have company again in a few minutes impelled him to the phone. He was pretty sure he knew who had called, and he wanted to get the message before Aaric came out.

Sure enough, it was Troy's cheery bass: "Hey, Terry. It's Troy. How you doing, champ? I talked to Linda yesterday and I thought I'd try to get the two of you to come down tomorrow and talk things out. Sure hope you're doing okay. Give me a call, all right? Remember, God loves you."

Terry stabbed at the phone's pad to erase the message. He heard the bathroom door open and caught the scent of otter and the warmth of steam. "Ow. It's really bright in here," Aaric said.

Terry hung up the phone. "Sorry. I thought it would be nice to have a little light."

"Oh, it is." Aaric grinned. "Now that the Motrin's kicking in." He walked over to the bed, holding the towel around his midsection. In the light, and after his shower, he looked considerably fresher and sleeker. He had left his shoulder and back fur spiky and damp. Terry didn't know if it was a 'look' or if it was just too hard to get dry, but he liked it.

Aaric picked up his clothes and glanced at Terry, then started to walk back to the bathroom. "Oh, sorry," Terry said, realizing he'd been staring. "I was just going to, um," he gestured to the kitchen, "make some coffee...you want some?"

"Sure." The otter put the clothes down again. "Thanks."

Terry shut the bedroom door behind him and crossed the living room, looking around to see whether there was anything he didn't want Aaric

to see. Nothing jumped out at him, so he ground some coffee and started it brewing.

Aaric emerged from the bedroom a few moments later and gave Terry a smile. "Smells good," he said, and walked around the living room. He brushed a finger over Terry's CD rack, and Terry was struck by how natural he looked in the living room. Even after six months together, Linda treated his living room almost like a museum, keeping her tail curled around herself and stepping carefully around so as not to touch anything. Aaric navigated the tables and couch with ease, and pulled a CD out with smooth grace.

"Cool!" he said. "Joe Jackson. My gay friends all say he's too straight, and my straight friends say he's too gay."

Terry recognized the album. "Go ahead and put it on if you want. The stereo's over there."

"Sure." Aaric glided over to the stereo and fitted the CD into the player. The music started a moment later. "I love the way he tells a story with his music. Do your friends tease you about him too?"

"My friends...we don't really talk much about music."

"Okay." Aaric leaned against the doorframe of the kitchen and watched Terry pour the coffee. "I know you're a good dancer, though. At least, I'm pretty sure I remember that."

...the music moving through him, his paws finding the rhythm instinctively...the sinuous shape across from him a blur through the lights...

"You are too."

Aaric grinned. "I saw your PS2. You practice with DDR too?"

"DDR Max 2." Terry smiled. "Cream or sugar?"

"God, no." Aaric took the cup, closed his eyes, and breathed in. "Mmm."

Terry took a sip from his. It was warm and soothing, the bitterness just enough to clear his head. "So were you celebrating something last night?"

"Hah." Aaric sipped from his cup. "I usually go dancing on Friday night. I just don't usually go alone."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Tuesday night, the guy I was seeing, Rod, he writes me an e-mail telling me he's going back to his ex, that he wants to see if they can make things work. Never mind that he's gone back to him three times already and the asshole just

uses him 'til he gets tired of him, then dumps him again...Sorry. I shouldn't go on."

"It's okay," Terry said. "You obviously care about him."

"Yeah, well, that's nice and all, but sometimes it ain't enough. You know?"

"Yeah." Terry sipped his coffee again.

"So, mind if I ask what's up with you? I guess you don't usually drink that much either. I don't see any liquor around here."

Terry shook his head. "My, uh, fiancée..." It took him a second to muster the courage to say the pronoun. "She had been having lunch with this lady friend for a couple weeks... Thursday she said she wanted to try, uh, that lifestyle."

"Wow. That's harsh." The otter looked sympathetic when Terry met his gaze. "Sorry, man. So, you decided to hop the fence too?"

"I guess so."

"Well...if it makes you feel any better, I don't remember a lot of details from last night, but I remember having a pretty good time. So I think you could have a future there."

...the firm curve of the otter's rear in his paws, the body pressed against him under the lights of the dance floor, the tongue seeking out his, music throbbing through both of them, the excitement, the arousal, the musk in his nose...

"Mmm." Only then did Terry notice the otter's smile and realize he was teasing gently. "You think so?"

"That, plus you didn't freak out this morning when you woke up next to a guy."

"Okay. Well, if I decide to apply for a position, can I list you as a reference?"

Aaric laughed. "Sure."

"I hear it's all about who you know."

"You can bet on that." The otter grinned at him, but the grin faded as they fell silent. "I'm sure she'll come back," he said. "If you're not born on the other side, it's pretty hard to get a position."

Terry sighed. "I don't know."

"How long were you engaged? If you don't mind me asking."

"No, it's okay. About three months."

"Did you know her for a while before that?"

Terry shook his head. "A couple months."

"Oh." Aaric finished his coffee and set his cup down. "Maybe I should get going."

"Cool!" he said. "Joe Jackson. My gay friends all say he's too straight, and my straight friends say he's too gay."



“Do you want to get some lunch?” Terry said, surprising himself.

Aaric looked closely at him. “I just got dumped by a guy going back to his ex. I don’t know if I wanna sign up for that again so soon.”

Terry shook his head. “I don’t think she’s coming back. I don’t know if I want her to. I just...mostly, I think I just want someone to talk to. It’s been a long time since I could really talk to someone. You know, just go have a drink, not worry about stuff...”

Aaric frowned. “What kind of stuff?”

Terry stared down into his coffee. “The kind of stuff...I haven’t been worrying about when I’ve been talking to you.”

The otter chuckled. “Well, all right. If you let me get changed first. These clothes smell of smoke and booze and...” He trailed off as the phone rang. “Someone really wants to talk to you.”

Terry didn’t think it was Troy calling back. The stallion had a warm parental attitude, but he knew when he was crowding, and calling this soon would be crowding. That was fine; Troy was the last person Terry wanted to talk to right now. He picked up the phone. “Hello?”

Linda’s voice, familiar and distant, came through. “Hi, Terry.”

“Hi.”

“I’m sorry, I really am. I just couldn’t go on.”

“It’s okay.”

“Did Troy call you?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you wanna go? I don’t think it’ll change anything, but if you wanna go then I’ll go.”

“I don’t know.” Aaric was examining his DVD collection now, taking out movies and looking at the boxes. *Casablanca*. *Goldfinger*.

“Are you okay, Terry?”

“Yeah, I...I sorta fell off the wagon last night.” He felt the need to tell her, more as a boast than a confession.

Linda laughed. “Aren’t we a pair. At least they matched us up right.”

“Yeah.”

“So do you think there’s any point to going to see Troy?”

“It’d make him happy.”

“I don’t know if I care about making Troy happy anymore. I’m over that. What about making me happy? What about making you happy? Be honest, Terry—have you been as happy in the last year as you were last night?”

...on his back, the otter humps, and he writhes along with him, dancing even more closely together, no light but the moon’s glow around the curtains, his claws punching holes in the bedsheets because he can’t keep them in, every nerve in his

body singing...

He sighed. “I think we at least owe him some closure.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Okay, call me tomorrow before you head over.”

“All right. See you then.”

“Bye, Terry.”

“Bye.” He hung up the phone and stood watching it for a second.

“Was that her?” Aaric looked up from the DVD shelf. Terry nodded. “I didn’t realize you were in AA. Were you in it together?”

“Not really.”

“Well, just so you know, I don’t need to drink. I mean, I drink socially, but I hardly keep anything in the house. Just beer. If you don’t want me to drink around you, that’s cool.”

Terry smiled at the otter’s earnest expression. He tried to remember the last time someone had said anything that considerate to him. “I really appreciate that,” he said, and then felt the need to be honest. “It’s okay, though. I’m not in AA. Linda and I, we met in a different sort of group. Have you ever heard of Genesis Ministries?”

Aaric shook his head.

“It’s a group for...for gay people who want to be straight.”

Recognition dawned on the otter’s muzzle, swiftly followed by anger. “Oh, yeah! I have heard about them! Jesus, those people are fucked up. You were one of them?”

“Technically, I still am. And they’re not all bad. They just want us to be happy.”

“Happy? I am happy, Terrence. I don’t need some holier-than-thou fuck to tell me I can’t be happy unless I stop being a faggot.” He folded his arms. “Is that what you do? Go out and pick up guys and then try to get them to join?”

“No! God, no! I was just telling Linda...she and I agreed we’ve been miserable for months now. We’d fool ourselves, but deep down that wasn’t the life for us. She just realized it first. It took me getting shitfaced to realize it for myself.”

Aaric no longer looked angry. “You’ll go back, Terry. Just like Rod went back to his asshole of an ex. And they’ll chew you up and beat you up and turn you into what they want you to be, and you’ll always go back to them.”

“Linda and I, we’re going down to see our counselor tomorrow, we’re going to tell him we quit...”

“You think he won’t fight to get you back? Just the fact that you’re going back to see him, that means they still got you. Listen, I wish you the best of luck, I really do. I hope I see you down at the club again next week or the week after. You’re a heck of a partner. But I can’t do this to myself

again this soon. You understand? I'm still hurting from the last time."

Terry nodded, reluctantly. Aaric reached into his pocket and put the silvery matchbook on the kitchen counter. He stood on tiptoe to kiss Terry lightly on the lips. "Good luck, Terry. I sure hope I see you again soon."

Terry kissed back, and couldn't think of anything to say, so he nodded and waved as the door closed behind the otter. He poured himself another cup of coffee and went to sit on the couch in the living room. Aaric had left "Casablanca" out on the coffee table, and Terry reached for it, then stopped himself. He didn't want to erase the traces of the otter's visit so soon.

The apartment always felt a bit empty when Linda was gone, but it was a good kind of empty, the kind where Terry could be alone with his thoughts and relax. After Linda left, the emptiness of the apartment had seemed to signal failure, that he'd tried so hard in so many ways and was left at the end with nothing but himself and the small cocoon of possessions he'd accumulated. Now, in the wake of Aaric's departure, the empty apartment felt lonely and lifeless, not an indictment of his past so much as a prediction of his future.

In his bookshelf was the book Troy had given him: *Living God's Life*. He took it down and sat back down on the couch, flipping through it to see some of the passages.

"A life cannot be devoted to God unless it is lived in strict accordance with His rules."

It was funny, that that should be the first line he came across. He and Linda had been pretty sure that sex before marriage was considered a sin, but Genesis allowed, even encouraged it. He and Linda kept separate apartments, but Troy knew they'd slept together.

A Bible quote in bold caught his eye at the top of a page: "Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."

That was from Psalms, he knew. He'd read it a hundred times or more. Now, looking at it in the wake of his disastrous week, it seemed completely foreign to him. What had God brought to pass for him?

... the scent of otter thick in his nostrils, the body held to him as he'd never held Linda, arms around him and the wonderful shared feelings of

release...

At the back of the book was a large color plate featuring the sorrowful head of Jesus looking pityingly at Terry. "I never said it would be easy," read the text on his left. "I only said it would be worth it," said the text on his right. Terry closed the book and replaced it on the shelf.

The music came to a stop. He took the CD from the stereo and put it back in its case, and wondered as he shelved it whether Aaric had the latest Joe Jackson live album. Does he like Dylan too, Elvis Costello, the Kinks? He traced a finger over his music collection and glanced again at "Casablanca," sitting on his coffee table. Did Aaric like to cuddle up and watch movies? Was he a talker, like Linda? Terry found himself shaking his head, saying no, the otter wouldn't be a talker; even though he was outgoing, he seemed to be the kind who was really into movies.

"Gah!" he said aloud. This was crazy, ruminating over the habits of someone he'd likely never see again, who was bad for him to begin with. He needed to get out of the apartment, get something to eat, maybe lose himself in a movie.

All afternoon, he ran from the memory of Aaric, with varying degrees of success. In the restaurant, he was able to avoid looking at the otter couple because there were so many other people around to watch. In the theater, however, watching the romantic comedy he had unwisely chosen, he pictured himself with Aaric in the movie's scenes. Afterwards, he wondered what the otter would have thought.

He ate a frozen pizza alone, watched "Saturday Night Live," and went to bed. Even with fresh sheets on the bed, he couldn't escape

... the muzzle moving slickly over him, the shape and scent his own tongue was busy with... the soft fur against him, afterwards...the fluffy chest in the dim morning light...the sleek body with only a towel covering it...the smile, and the kiss...

his memories, until he padded to the bathroom and jerked off, panting, into a towel. The act was rough and felt more desperate than anything else, but it calmed him enough to let him get to sleep.

Sunday morning, he called Linda.

"What time do you want to go?" she said.

He had already put a lot of thought into his answer. It was still hard to say. "I don't."

A Bible quote in bold caught his eye at the top of a page: "Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."

“Really?”

“Yeah. I...can’t do this either. Maybe all those liberals were right.”

Linda chuckled. “That makes me feel better. I really never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know.”

“We just had nothing in common, really.”

“We both wanted to be straight.”

“Did we? Or did our families want that for us? Your mom, my dad...and my mom, really...”

“And Troy. And each other, I guess.”

“They only put us together ’cause we’re both tigers and about the same age.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Are you totally sure?”

There was a long pause. Finally, she said, “No. Not totally.”

Terry exhaled. “Me neither. I just think...it can’t be as easy as they wanted us to think. I mean, God is about love, right? So how can any kind of love be against God?”

“I know.”

He pressed the phone to his ear, missing Linda suddenly. “Do you want to maybe come over later? Have some dinner? I’d like to meet...um...”

“Elaine?” She sounded amused. “I’m not sure you’re ready for her yet. Ow! I’m just kidding.” There was a brief scuffle on the other end of the phone, and then Linda came back on. “We’re busy tonight, but how about Tuesday?”

“That’s fine.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.”

“Thanks, Linda.”

“Thank you too, Terry. And good luck.”

He stood at the window afterwards, watching the sun climb into the sky. It was scary not to have a direction, like in the days before he’d joined Genesis. He was adrift, and he felt that his own rudder was inadequate. In the end, though, it was the only one he had. He could follow God’s way without letting other people interpret what that way was.

At least, he hoped so.

He was getting together a load of laundry about half an hour later when the knock came at his door. His first thought was that Troy had come down to see him in person. On second thought, as he walked to the door, he thought the stallion’s knock would be more assertive and confident, and that he wouldn’t resort to a visit until Terry had missed more than one appointment.

Before stooping to the peephole, he tried not to hope that it would be Aaric on the other side, but that didn’t stop his heart from jumping happily when he saw that it was. He swung the door open.

“Hi,” Aaric said, and held up a paw. “I’m really sorry about yesterday. It was pretty rude of me to leave. And I know this is kind of stalker-creepy,

just showing up like this, but I didn’t know where else to find you.”

“No, I understand,” Terry said. “Want to come in?”

“Yeah.” The otter smiled, and padded into the room. Terry closed the door and turned, leaning with his back to it, his tail lashing against the wood. Aaric faced him, hands waving, pacing as he spoke. “See, I was thinking yesterday, and it sounded like maybe you really didn’t want to go on with your ministry thing. So I thought, here’s this nice guy struggling, basically between Scylla and Charybdis, except not really, ’cause I think Charybdis in this case is maybe being built up to be way more scary than she really is, but anyway, he’s here with all this stuff going on and I just walked out, let him struggle for himself. That’s not a real nice thing to do.”

Terry folded his arms and couldn’t help but grin. “That’s very Christian of you,” he said.

Aaric’s ears folded back and he looked down. “Uh...well, in the interest of being honest, I should say that I couldn’t stop thinking about you all day.”

“Really?” Aaric nodded. “Funny. I thought about you all day yesterday, too.”

“Did you really?” The otter looked up and smiled. “All day? What did you do?”

“Oh, went to a restaurant, a movie, had dinner here, went to bed.”

“You thought of me in bed?” Aaric grinned as Terry looked down. “Sorry, sorry. Jumping ahead. Listen, there’s a church in my neighborhood, a couple of my buddies go there, and they have services at noon. I don’t go all the time, but I thought maybe you’d want to go there instead of your ministry?”

“Actually, I called Linda already this morning. We decided not to go back to Genesis.”

“Oh, I see.” Aaric stroked his whiskers. “You know, I believe this church has a ministry associated with it. Called Aaric Ministries. Their mission is to rescue cute tigers from being sad and lonely. Think you might want to join?”

Terry laughed. “If they continue to use classical Greek references, I’m sold. Let me get dressed.”

When he came back out into the living room, Aaric was holding the DVD of “Casablanca.” “Did you watch this after I took it out?”

Terry shook his head. “No, just...never got around to putting it back.”

Aaric looked at him curiously, and then smiled as if he’d figured out something. “Maybe we can watch it sometime. Should I leave it out?”

“Nah. You can put it back.”

Aaric set the movie back on the shelf, squaring the case so it sat even with the others. Terry

smiled at that, and as the otter turned back to him, he thought of Bogie's last line. He put his arm around Aaric's shoulder just like Bogie had, and it felt right. It felt like waking up and seeing the curtains shimmering with the first light of a new day.





JOHN NUNEMACHER
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